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MISS BLANCHARD OF CHICAGO.

VOL. I.

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Miss Blanchard of Chicago

BY

ALBERT KEVILL-DAVIES,

AUTHOR OF "AN AMERICAN WIDOW," "MARRIAGE UP TO DATE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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MISS BLANCHARD OF CHICAGO.

MISS BLANCHARD OF CHICAGO.

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CHAPTER I.

A R T H U R V A L L A N C E.

It was a hot afternoon in the middle of June. The sky was of a deep blue, dotted with fleecy clouds, and the sun was shining with a delicious brilliancy and an almost torrid heat that seemed to gladden the heart of every living creature, from the cows that were lazily chewing the cud in the shade of big elms and oaks down to the humble toads which squatted and dozed upon the stones in moist places.

It was an afternoon on which idleness and comfort in the open air constituted true beatitude.

Sitting upon a bank in one of the prettiest parts of Gloucestershire, and gloomily contemplating the picturesque scenery before him,

was a youth, well developed and unquestionably good looking, of about seventeen years old ; and a few feet beneath the spot on which he sat flowed a wide, deep stream, sluggishly wending its placid way through thickly-wooded coverts, and meadows abundant with ripening grass.

The occasional splash of a trout, as it rose at a fly, sounded pleasantly in this youth's ears, and the merry song of a lark high up in the skies, the note of a cuckoo in a tall sycamore close at hand, and the whistling and twittering of the various birds in the trees and bushes, accompanied by the drone of the bees as they hovered about him, made the air resound with harmony and gladness ; but there seemed to be no responding chord in his heart, for his expressive face was clouded with melancholy, while his large blue eyes gazed before him with a dissatisfied, yet wistful expression.

The sweet scents of wild flowers stole into his nostrils, and the varied music of the feathered tribe rang clearly and gleefully through the woods ; but it seemed as if at that moment nothing could arouse within him any feelings of hope or pleasure. Joyous as was the day, lovely as were his surroundings, clothed in her

most superb attire as was Nature on this particular day, the thoughts of this youth, even in the presence of so much beauty, were dwelling upon the subject of Hell, and this was the cause of his sitting in glum and dismal mood, so utterly at variance with the exquisite works of creation by which he was environed on every side.

Arthur Vallance had been an orphan since he was four years old, and had been left by his mother to the sole care and guardianship of her brother, Mr Allen Redwood, a severe and narrow-minded man, who affected a species of intolerant and cold religion, of which the essence was the certainty of eternal punishment. With his nephew he was especially strict, apparently considering that the surest way to make a worthy and righteous man of him was to terrify him with pictures of the torture sometimes believed to be the future lot of the sinner. Any little boyish frivolity, any trifling act not previously approved, any careless remark, were each of them sufficient to bring down upon young Vallance's head discourses about brimstone and fire and eternity that filled the youth with awe and disgust. And now that he was growing to manhood he would steal away to

some secluded nook, where he would gloomily ponder in solitude if his uncle could be right, and if his Maker could really have ordained such an awful fate for harmless children. And at the close of such pondering he would return to the house with his mind in a chaos of bewilderment and doubt.

Unfortunately for him, although his two cousins—Mr Redwood's sons—were both at Rugby, his own education had not been like that of most other English boys in his station of life, or the subject might not have obtained such control over his mind. Instead of being sent to a public school, he had depended for his scholastic attainments upon a village grammar school, and upon a neighbouring vicar whose mind had rusted and contracted during forty years' service in a remote rural parish, of which the annual stipend was one hundred and ten pounds, and the population one hundred and twenty souls—the latter mostly labourers.

Under ordinary circumstances, Arthur Vallance would probably have been a bright and spirited youth, but he had never known his father, and, as has been said, he lost his mother when only four years old, and was at once transferred to the custody of his uncle, who was also sole trustee of his little fortune

of ten thousand pounds, and who, by special proviso in Mrs Vallance's will, must remain guardian and trustee until his ward arrived at the mature age of twenty-five.

It was after an unpleasant and far from comforting harangue that Arthur Vallance had wandered through the woods to the river side, and had sat in gloomy meditation to ponder upon the sorrows of the present and the terrors of the future. It seemed so incomprehensible to him that the final end of so much beauty and glory must be destruction and torture, and yet it was impressed upon him a dozen times a day that such was the case. He would have liked to "mend his ways," as he was for ever being told he must do if he would avert the terrible doom; but the fact was, he did not know what to mend or where to begin—it seemed that he gave such general dissatisfaction that the only way to mend would be first to destroy and then to re-create him.

For a time, as he sat beside the river, the melodious chirping of birds around him, the balmy, sweetly-perfumed breeze which fanned his face, the splendid panorama stretched before his eyes, the deep blue canopy overhead, dotted with specks of snowy-white fleece, all seemed like a mockery—as if they were there

simply to tantalise him. To such an extent had his mind become saturated with these incessant teachings about Hell, that it was so poisoned as to be almost unable to receive from his environment any impression of the Creator's glory, or to be drawn into a dream of future happiness.

Presently, a large, black and white Newfoundland dog came bounding and crashing through the underwood, and thrust its nose into the young man's face.

"Happy Monarch!" the youth exclaimed, taking the animal's head caressingly between his hands. "For you, at all events, there can be no wearisome lectures on eternal punishment, for you there can be no hell."

The dog looked inquisitively into the speaker's face, and then bounded out of his reach, curveting and frisking round him, and barking joyfully.

High spirits and happiness, even in an animal, may be sometimes contagious, and the companionship of this intelligent creature, overflowing with delight, exerted a beneficial effect on the gloomy lad, and partially brought him out of his depressed state of mind.

He rose from the ground, and, addressing the dog, said,—

"Come along, Monarch, old boy ; we'll go and find Vie."

Monarch apparently understood the remark, for his tail wagged faster, and his bark sounded louder than ever. It was evident that to "go and find Vie" was a popular pastime with the Newfoundland.

Arthur walked briskly along a path by the side of the river for a few hundred yards until he came to a boat-house in which were fastened several river craft of various sizes and types. Selecting a light canoe, he took his seat in it, pushed it off into the stream, and then commenced to paddle against the current, the dog following on the bank.

The exercise of propelling the canoe upstream, aided by the natural beauty and peaceful solitude of the scene, appeared to act as a restorative to his spirits, and, before long, he was whistling a tune to himself, and making a vigorous effort to shake off the nightmare produced by the continuous inculcation of the doctrine of impossible salvation. The frame of mind into which he had been brought by forever having a mirror of everlasting misery and torment upheld to his view, was certainly not a healthy one, and, if it were continued, could only end in one of two things

—a revulsion of feeling that would rebel against all doctrinal religion, or a morbid, hopeless, unmanly vein of thought that would annihilate all prospect of any earthly happiness or any successful career.

Already there was a tendency in his mind to the former of these two, and the seeds of scepticism and disbelief had commenced to germinate.

And as he paddled leisurely up the river, meditatively contemplating the charming scenery by which he was surrounded, the doubts and disbelief of the truth of his uncle's teachings crept insidiously into his mind, and took firm root.

For nearly five miles he glided smoothly along the water, past the sweet-smelling woods, past orchards abounding with foliage and young fruit, past big meadows luxuriant with ripening grass, until he arrived at a bend where the banks of the river rose into high steep cliffs, and the splash of his paddles re-echoed as down a long tunnel. Suddenly he turned the canoe towards a narrow break in the cliff, ran it into a little inlet, and, having made the craft fast to a stake, commenced to ascend the bank, followed by the dog who, as his master was now on the side

of the water opposite to that from which he had started, had been compelled to swim across.

After a stiff climb of some sixty feet, Arthur passed through a small shrubbery, and emerged into a large and well-kept garden, at the end of which stood a pretty little house of Elizabethan architecture, completely enveloped in ivies and Virginia creepers. A most delicious little spot, indeed, for anyone who loved nature and solitude, and wished to be shielded from the obtrusion of the world; for the river, surrounded by steep cliffs, took a sharp curve just at this point, and traced its course in the shape of a horse-shoe round the house and garden, the only approach from the land being through a dense wood, which loomed up thick and picturesque in close proximity. It almost seemed to be in another world, being so completely isolated; but the flower-beds, the turf, the hedges, the carefully-tended creepers, the cleanly and neat appearance of the house, plainly indicated that it was tenanted by some one of cultured and refined tastes.

As Arthur Vallance stepped across the garden, with Monarch walking sedate and erect at his heels, the figure of a young girl of about sixteen years of age issued from a

French window, which opened on to the lawn, and walked towards him.

"Hallo, Vie," he said, as he stood before her and took her hand in his, "here I am again, you see. It seems impossible for me to stay away for a whole day."

"We are always glad to see you," she replied, making no effort to withdraw her hand from his grasp, but looking up into his face with a frank, pleased expression. "We should fear you were ill if you stayed away for forty-eight hours."

"All the sunshine of my life emanates from here," he answered; "and it is only when with you, or coming to you, that I seem to have any hope for the future or any enjoyment in the present. For about the thousandth time I have once again this afternoon been condemned by my uncle to eternal punishment, and have had to undergo a long lecture on the reality of the unquenchable fire."

"It's very miserable, isn't it? But what was the cause of the row to-day?"

"He saw me walking with you in the wood yesterday; and he told me I was never to come here again. Ever since we first met, eighteen months ago, I have managed to keep

our acquaintance a secret from him. I knew if he found out that I had any friends, he would try to take them away from me. I was quite right ; the moment he discovers it, he forbids me to come here."

"And what are you going to do ?"

She looked anxiously into his face as she asked the question ; and her expression betrayed to him how much happiness or disappointment awaited her in his answer.

"I am going to come as often as ever," he replied, in a voice full of determination. "I am seventeen, and I will not be treated any longer like a boy of ten. I am not a pauper dependent on him. My mother left him ten thousand pounds in trust for me ; and although he says that some of it has been unfortunately invested, and is not paying any dividends just now, that is his fault. He invested it ; I didn't."

"I am glad you talk like that," she answered. "You are nearly a man now, and must strike out in an independent line of your own. When is he going to decide upon your profession ? Is he going to try to keep you chained up at home like a house-dog all your life ?"

"I don't know. He always says that I

will never be good for anything in this world, and that my fate in the next is too awful to think about."

"He's a narrow-minded old goose, and I would rather take your chances than his. Such bigotry and unkindness are not Christian. My mother is much better than he, and she ridicules his ideas."

"How pretty you look in that hat, Vie," said Arthur, suddenly changing the subject. "Who would expect to find such a lovely little Venus hidden away in this lonely corner?"

"Nobody has found her yet," she answered, with a laugh. "Years and years roll on, and mother and I continue to live here without the outside world apparently knowing of our existence. The butcher, the baker, and the grocer are our only callers; and if by any chance a strange intruder should rouse our front-door bell from its continuous silence, Martha informs him or her, in the tersest manner possible, that 'Missus is not at home.'"

"For my sake I hope that no one will find her. When once she is found she may soon be taken away. Let us go in and talk to Mrs Carlisle for a little while, and then we will

come out and sit on the lawn until it is time to return to the Temple of Gloom."

"Shall you acknowledge that you have been to see us again—that you have disobeyed your august guardian?"

"Yes; if asked, I shall admit it at once. I don't care. I am going to strike now. I am getting big enough and strong enough to have a mind of my own."

"Indeed you are," she said, as she glanced admiringly at his lithe and muscular figure, which promised, in another two or three years, to develop into a frame of enormous strength.

CHAPTER II.

THE TENANTS OF RIVER LAWN.

WHEN he entered the house with Violet Carlisle, Arthur was greeted by a pleasant-voiced, handsome lady of some thirty-one or thirty-two years of age. This was Violet's mother, Mrs Carlisle, a widow, who, for about a dozen years, had resided with her child and an only servant in the picturesque little house on the bank of the river.

There was something in this lady that stamped her as different to the general run of widows, or supposed widows, which are to be met wandering about in all parts of the globe. In the first instance, it was very plain that she was a *bona fide* recluse, and not a pretending one. An observant person, after a few minutes' acquaintance with her, must at once have arrived at the conclusion that she had sought her present abode purely for the facilities it offered for a life of complete solitude, and not for any opportunities it might

afford of obtaining an *entrée* into county society. In the second instance, there was an air of gentle dignity, blended with quiet melancholy, that at once stamped her as a woman with a past and a history that, however tragic or sensational they might be, were locked in a bosom which could hold a secret against all inquirers. In the third instance, her devotion to her daughter was so obviously apparent, that it would have been evident to the most casual of ordinary observers that, for her, all the charms and interests of life lay in her only child.

She was indeed very young to have shut herself up in such an out-of-the-way corner, and to have relinquished all the pleasures and recreations of society ; and when she had just arrived at this pretty little retreat, although then a mother, and accompanied by her child, she had barely attained womanhood.

It had been some little time after her arrival that her neighbours had discovered her existence, and then strenuous efforts had been made to penetrate the mystery by which people said she was surrounded. The vicar of the parish in which her house was situated had called upon her two or three times, but had never been able to get beyond the im-

passable barrier which Martha's brawny figure and frigid manner presented. Then he had deputed his wife to try, by feminine strategy, to spy out the interior of this well-guarded little fortress, and to capture the secret which it contained; but this good lady's efforts had been equally unavailing, although she had gone to work with a persistency that would have done credit to a lady Brigadier-General in the Salvation Army.

Three times she handed her cards to Martha to be given to that faithful woman's mistress, but each time the servant had returned to say that "Missus was engaged"; then she had sent in a note asking for an interview, but with only the same result; and, lastly, determined to gain access, she had stealthily crept round the house to the lawn, instead of going to the front door, and, seeing the object of her search sitting with a little child under a tree, had been making in that direction, when the vigilant Martha had suddenly deployed out of the house at the double-quick and made a very aggressive demonstration towards her, seizing her by one of the arms, sharply spinning her round, and escorting her quickly to the gate by which she had entered.

That was the last attempt that the vicar's

wife, or any one else, made to investigate the mystery of the little house on the cliff. The vicar gave it out that the new inhabitants were a mad woman and her child in charge of a keeper, and that it would be most improper for any one to intrude upon the poor lady or to attempt to discover who she was. He had, he said, ascertained that a lease of the place had been taken by a London solicitor, acting, no doubt, on behalf of the unhappy woman's relatives, who were anxious to keep their misfortune from the knowledge of the world.

And thus it had come about that the sweet little cottage, known as River Lawn, was regarded as a private lunatic asylum, tenanted by a beautiful mad woman and a lovely little girl—the latter, doubtless, also affected in the same manner, according to the custom of heredity. As a matter of fact, however, Mrs Carlisle was a clever and studious woman, whose principal occupation for many years past had been educating her child ; but as the story of her madness enabled her to remain in the seclusion she desired, and even to take long, quiet walks in the woods with her daughter, without fear of being annoyed or noticed by strangers, she took no heed of it.

Her acquaintance with Arthur Vallance had

been brought about purely by accident, nearly eighteen months before the opening of this story. It occurred one day when Arthur was paddling past the house in a canoe, and Violet was standing on the cliff. The former, while gazing up at the young girl above him, leaned too much to one side, upset his fragile little craft, and was precipitated into the water. Having grasped the canoe, which was now upside down, he was swimming about in search of a landing place, when Violet called to him, and directed his attention to a little creek where the sides were not so steep. Here he succeeded in effecting a landing, and, aided by Violet, who descended to the water edge, in righting his canoe.

But the young lady had then insisted on taking him into the house to be treated in whatever way her mother might think best for a half-drowned boy. He was given hot brandy and water, was wrapped in numerous blankets, and his clothes were all dried before the kitchen fire, and when, after a visit of some hours, he took his departure, he realised that he had never received so much kind attention in his life. Not a word had he said to any one about his accident or its sequel, but from that day he had become a frequent

visitor at River Lawn, and a deep attachment had arisen between him and its two inmates, although he never knew any more about the circumstances which had induced Mrs Carlisle to seek a home in this isolated spot, than any of her neighbours knew.

"I am glad to see you, Arthur," the widow said pleasantly, holding out her hand; "how are you getting on with your uncle? No more rows, I hope."

"Yes, there has been another row," the boy answered, "and I have had a terrible lecture on the error of my ways. My uncle fully explained and demonstrated to me that I am predestined to eternal punishment. If such be the case, what is the use of fighting out the battle of life? Fortunately, however, I don't believe it. The curious thing is, though, that the row all came about through his having seen me in the wood with Vie, and having discovered that I have been visiting here."

"So he has found it out at last?"

"Yes, he has found it out at last, although I have done everything I could to conceal it from him. I always hid the canoe in the bushes in that corner, and whenever I have been asked as to my movements, I have

always said I have been up or down the river. He doesn't mind my spending a lot of time on the water, because, you see, it doesn't cost anything, and there is a possibility of my being drowned, and besides, it takes me out of the way."

The lad spoke bitterly, and the curl of his lips showed that cynicism and hatred were already being engrafted in his mental constitution, when, at his age, hope and admiration ought to have been two of his most prominent characteristics.

"And has he forbidden you to come here again?" asked the widow.

"Absolutely," was the reply. "He said that whoever you were, you were here under a cloud, and not a fit associate for me or any one in a respectable station of life. I don't mind telling you what he said, because I hate him, and because you know what a mean-spirited chap he is. With all his outward show of religion, with all his everlasting jabber, with all his Pharisaic confidence of his own salvation, he is more afraid of danger or harm coming to his precious body than any one I ever knew. His very cowardice belies his vaunted faith."

"And he said that I was under a cloud,

and not a fit associate for you, did he?" asked Mrs Carlisle, paying no attention to the youth's outburst of passion.

"Yes."

"You are right; he is a coward. Look here, you must come again, whether he wishes it or not. It may be wrong to counsel you to disobey your guardian, but he is a tyrant to you, and you must be justified in doing so, at least, to a certain extent. You are our only friend, and, young as you are, I am going to repose confidence in you. I will not tell you now what I am going to tell, but come to-morrow and you shall hear. You will soon be at man's estate, and I have hopes that you may turn out a good and true man."

"I daresay I shall be able to hold my own," he answered, drawing himself up, and assuming an air of importance. "I can lick almost any chap of my size or age, but, unfortunately, a fellow can't thrash his own uncle or guardian—at least, he could do it, but it wouldn't look well."

"Ah, well; you are growing up now, and will soon be free from his censorship and authority. The next four years will soon pass."

"I daresay they will, but I am under his

guardianship until I reach twenty-five, and he has absolute control over my money until that time. I daresay before that he will have flung it all away in bad investments."

"But surely he would have to make it up?"

"No, I don't believe he would. You see, my mother had such implicit belief in his infallibility in all things, that she left him absolute control, and even inserted a clause to the effect that he should not be held responsible for any loss or depreciation of values. I daresay he insisted on that before he consented to act."

"It was very, very foolish! The women are always so silly in matters of that kind. Very often, because a man can roll fluently off his tongue a lot of jargon, and can pose successfully as a grave and serious-minded person, we are quite willing to entrust him with the care and property of those we love best. When David said, 'all men are liars,' he might truly have added, 'and most women are idiots.' The first has been proved to be true almost beyond dispute; the second appears to be undeniable."

"But you haven't seen any men for years, you say. They may have changed since you

knew them ; they may be growing more truthful."

Mrs Carlisle laughed satirically.

"I do not believe in the universal infamy of mankind," she answered. "If I did, I should not allow you here to worm yourself into the confidence and esteem of Vie and myself. But, unfortunately for me, I had in my earlier days far too real an experience and graphic an illustration of the deceit and treachery to which some of your sex can stoop, and that experience and illustration came from a source whence it might have been least expected. However, reflecting and moralising always make me sad, so let us leave them for the present."

Then they changed the subject, and a little later, when they all had had tea, Violet Carlisle and Arthur returned to the garden.

"Mother seems quite depressed and moody, to-day," the girl said, as she and her companion sat down on the grass under a large elm tree. "I don't know what has caused it, unless it was a letter that she received this morning. Letters are such rare things with us that my curiosity is always excited when one comes, but, to-day, mother never offered to satisfy it, she only compressed her lips

after reading it, crushed it in her hand, and put it in her pocket. She is always so kind and gentle, but this morning she really looked quite fierce."

"I wish I could help her," said Arthur gallantly. "I suppose it is some new trouble. You two are the only real friends I have. I shall never love any one but you, Vie."

She looked up at him pertly and coquettishly as she answered,—

"It is a very nice thing to be loved, but I fear it is very dangerous. Mother said once that 'love is the root of all trouble.' And you know we are both children to talk about real love, and grown-up people always laugh so at the love affairs of young ones like us."

"But, Vie, you never see any grown-up people. How do you know what they laugh at?"

"From that universal disseminator of every kind of knowledge, Mudie's Library. Don't you know what a mixed variety of literature comes down in our fortnightly box?"

"Well, yes; I remember noticing the other day that a recent work on Theosophy was sandwiched between Renan's *Life of Jesus*, and one of the latest three volume novels."

"Just so. Now, Mudie supplies us with

all our worldly and spiritual knowledge, barring what we pick up from our morning paper. We read everything—theological works, theosophic works, translations of the ancients, like Homer and Cicero, essays on Socialism, histories of heathen religions and society novels."

"By Jove! what a *pot-pourri*; and which is most to your taste?"

"That depends much upon my frame of mind and the weather, but I fear my taste is so far demoralised as to experience the greatest amount of enjoyment in a really good novel. Mother, however, limits the gratification of that appetite to one novel a week."

"You are fortunate to be allowed to read them at all. If I were seen by my uncle with a novel in my hand, I should have to listen to some very forcible reminders of the terrible fate awaiting youngsters who indulge in such literature."

"How narrow-minded! There can't be any real harm in it."

"Of course not. That is shown in the fact that my cousins can read anything they like when they are at home, and will not be in danger of the terrible fate which inevitably awaits me. Poor me, ever since I can remem-

ber, I have been everything vile, and pre-destined, on account of my vileness, to everlasting punishment and torture. Sometimes I am absolutely unable to think of anything but that place which commences with a capital H."

" You ought to try to keep such thoughts out of your mind. They certainly cannot be healthy for one so young, and they will only make you morbid and gloomy."

" I am never morbid or gloomy when I am with you," he said more cheerfully. " For the past year and a half you have been the only sun that has shone in upon my existence, and very warmly and brightly have you shone, but now my uncle wants even to extinguish you from my life, and to place me in greater darkness than ever. His doing so, however, will be the signal for revolution."

" What a pity he found out that you came here. I suppose, though, that he was obliged to discover it sooner or later, and it seems curious that it was so long before he did so."

" I was always so careful to conceal it from him, and no one could ever see me turning into the creek or in the garden here. This place is so beautifully concealed, as you know ; if there was any one on the river near here, I

always used to pass by and come back when they were out of sight."

"I am so sorry. I don't want you to give us up."

"I will never give you up, Vie, dear," he answered emphatically; "never! I may be only a boy still, but my love for you is the love of a man. You love me, too, don't you, Vie?"

"I think I do now," she answered coyly, letting her eyelids droop over and conceal her pretty brown eyes; "but you see I am very young, and I can't answer for the state of my feelings when I have grown older." Then, looking fully into his face, she added, "Besides, you know, I have never talked to any man except you and the gardener, so that, I suppose, I may be called a very inexperienced girl as far as affairs of the heart are concerned."

They both laughed at her remark, and then Arthur held out his hand and bade her good-bye.

She followed him through the shrubbery to the edge of the cliff, and watched him descend it and embark in his canoe, waving her hand as he rounded the bend.

CHAPTER III.

ARTHUR AND HIS UNCLE.

ARTHUR VALLANCE pulled briskly down the river, and, under the influence of his muscular strokes with the paddles, and the assistance of the current, the canoe shot swiftly through the water until finally he ran it alongside the boat-house. Then he made it secure and walked rapidly towards Redwood House, the abode of his uncle and aunt.

It was past seven o'clock, and the western sky was streaked with crimson and gold, while a fiery red ball was sinking gradually towards the horizon. In the valley through which the river flowed, a light mist was rising, and in the eastern firmament, a nearly full moon was shedding a pale thin light. The sublimity of summer's evening had set upon the scene, and that intense and still peace peculiar to the country reigned supreme throughout; but as Arthur, step-by-step, approached his home, gloom and dissatisfaction once more commenced

to prey upon him, his thoughts again turning to the noxious doctrine with which his uncle never ceased to harass him. At one moment nature and all creation's beauties seemed to cry aloud to him to have hope and to repel the ideas and despondency which were the offshoots of his training ; but at another, long habituation to his guardian's teaching, and the firm inculcation into his mind that, for him, everything in this world and beyond must be total darkness, obtained the victory and weighed him down. The beneficial influence which Violet Carlisle had exercised over his spirits was fast waning again, and the voice of all the glories stretched before his eyes seemed powerless to console him. He passed through the large hall of Redwood House without meeting anyone, and gave a sigh of relief when he arrived in his room and commenced to dress for dinner. As there were some visitors stopping in the house, he knew that he would be free from persecution for the rest of the evening, and as his uncle and aunt were going to London the following day but one, he had some hopes that, the time being so short, he might elude any interview with the former before his departure. It was a very rare thing that he accompanied them to town,

and for being left alone at Redwood he was always grateful. Two or three times during dinner he detected his relative eyeing him with a sombre scowl, but he paid no attention, and endeavoured to look as unconcerned and innocent as possible.

The following morning, however, brought with it a blow for which the youth was entirely unprepared—a blow which never for one moment had he imagined his guardian could deal him.

At about eleven o'clock he was walking in the gardens with one of the ladies visiting at the house, when a servant approached and informed him that Mr Allen Redwood wished to see him in the study. At once his heart sank within him, for he knew that the hour for the tussle had arrived, and that, single-handed, unaided, and without even the inspiring sympathy of a friend, he would have to combat with a hard, intolerant, resolute man, by whom he had been suppressed, snubbed and ruled ever since he could remember. Hitherto, he had always succumbed and yielded, often unwillingly and surlily, it is true, but, nevertheless, he had surrendered and obeyed ; although, when strategy or dissimulation had been able to modify the burden of his obedience, he

had seldom failed to employ it. Since, unquestionably, according to his uncle, he was lost, he might, he used to think when smaller, as well be annihilated for big sins as little ones. He walked moodily off to his guardian's study, firm in one resolution at least—that he would flatly decline to give up the acquaintance of Mrs Carlisle and her daughter.

A tall, well-built man, somewhere between forty and fifty years of age, was standing in one of the three windows to the study when Arthur entered. Turning round to greet his nephew, this gentleman showed a face that might have been handsome, except for a severe, soured expression, that was unmistakably its most prominent characteristic. As his nephew entered, Mr Redwood walked to the writing-table and sat down in a chair before it. Arthur stood facing him on the other side of the table.

“So you've disobeyed me?” the elder man said, crossing his legs, leaning back in his chair, and glancing up at the poor youth with an expression that seemed to say, “Your doom is settled now, at all events.”

“How do you know?” asked young Vallance defiantly, shoving both hands into his trousers' pockets and meeting his uncle's gaze without a sign of fear.

"By your guilty manner," responded the other, in one of those voices so flavoured with the tincture of divine unction, and the lemonade of melancholy drawl, that they really seem to bemoan the very creation of the universe or the existence of mankind.

"Bosh!" retorted Arthur, "my manner couldn't appear very guilty, as there was nothing to be guilty of."

"Do you add to your other sin that of falsehood?"

"Certainly not. I deny, though, that I have committed any other sin."

"Have you not been to those people at River Lawn since I forbade you to hold any communication with them."

"I have; but where is the sin in doing so?"

"In your disobedience to me, you ungrateful dog. How dare you wilfully disobey me like this, and then calmly admit having done so?"

"Just now, when you thought I was denying it, you accused me of lying; now you are chiding me because I don't deny it. There is no reason I should deny it. There is no harm in it. I am old enough to chose my own acquaintances. I refuse to be persecuted by you in this manner, and I don't believe things

are as you picture them. Something tells me that it is all false and distorted. Nature herself gives it the lie."

Mr Redwood looked at his nephew, shrugged his shoulders, and said,—

"I was quite ready for this outburst. I have foreseen it coming, and am fortunately prepared for it. It is useless to attempt to argue with you or to reform you any more. Since the day you first entered this house you have been a disgrace to it, and a ceaseless care and worry to your aunt and myself. From that day you have tended to our degradation and disgrace."

"No doubt. My childish prattle and actions, when only four years old, must have brought immense disgrace on you. Ever since I can remember, you have preached to me the evil of my ways and the disgrace I am to the family. As far back as I can recollect, you have impressed upon me that I am beyond hope of reformation, that I am predestined to eternal destruction. Instinct and some strange voice rouses me at last to disavow such a doctrine; and to disbelieve such outrageous teachings."

Mr Redwood rose slowly from his chair, and, drawing himself upright, said,—

"I cannot stand this, although I have long

expected it. To your other wicked actions you now add the opprobrious conduct of rebelling against those in authority over you, and of scoffing at religion."

"I do nothing of the kind."

"That will do. I can hear no more. I called you here to tell you what I had decided upon in reference to your future. For my family's sake, and for my name's sake, I must get rid of you. In England you will certainly bring disgrace and shame upon us all. America is the best place for you, and perhaps a little roughing it out there will bring you to your senses and to a more humble spirit. I have no hopes for you myself, but it is my duty to do my best for you in spite of all your disobedience, and it appears to me that America is the most suitable place to send you. It is a large country where a great many incorrigible rogues, sent from England, have apparently done well."

"And to what part of that large country—that asylum for England's incorrigible rogues, as you call it—do you contemplate sending me—if I am willing to go?"

"There is no 'if' about it; go, you must. I have, after much trouble, obtained a most excellent opening for you on a splendid farm

in Dakota. There you will be taught everything in regard to American farming, and you will be subjected to discipline, a thing which you sadly need. I am paying a large sum of money as premium, and also a hundred a-year while you remain with the gentleman with whom I have made arrangements."

"Do you know him?"

"Not personally, but—"

"How did you hear of him and his farm?"

Mr Allen Redwood fidgeted uneasily, for he liked neither his nephew's persistent questioning nor the searching gaze with which the youth insisted on looking into his eyes. He did not care to tell the exact truth about the farming scheme, neither did he desire to commit himself to an absolute and glaring lie, which might be discovered at a later date; but there was something about the resolute attitude which Arthur Vallance had assumed that made him nervous and uncomfortable and loathe to prevaricate, yet anxious to do so.

The real truth of the matter was, that his search for an opening for his nephew had merely consisted of his answering some of the advertisements addressed to "Parents and Guardians," assuring these that there were excellent opportunities on ranches and farms

in various parts of the “States” and Canada for numbers of “sons of gentlemen.”

Mr Redwood had merely replied to several of these advertisements, and had made his selection from the answers.

It had been simply a question of pounds and shillings, and he had found, to his satisfaction, that any man able to pay the price can effectually dispose of as many young persons as he pleases, and there is every probability that, if the exiled youths be kept properly short of pocket-money, it will be some time before they return to their native country.

Still, he realised that it would not do to allow his characteristic straightforwardness to lead him into the unpleasant dilemma which might result from acknowledging too frankly the real facts to his nephew.

He determined, therefore, to compromise with his conscience, and to tell a part of the truth, adding to it what, under the circumstances, he considered a few justifiable fibs.

“I first heard of this gentleman,” he said, laying great stress on the word “gentleman,” “through an advertisement in the papers; but I have since made careful inquiries and gone thoroughly into his references, and I have found that he is a man of the highest standing,

and one of the largest gentleman farmers in America. The place to which you are going is an excellent one, and your prospects out there will be most brilliant. I consider that I was very lucky to have seen his agent's advertisements."

"Indeed," replied Arthur in a voice strangely low and calm; "and suppose I decline to go to this place? Suppose I refuse to be packed up and sent out of the country, like a convict in transportation times? How do I know that this farm is not a sort of penal settlement for the superfluous children of large familied Englishmen, and for unfortunate wards like myself?"

"It is nonsense to talk like that. You know that, for your dear mother's sake, I would never send you anywhere without ascertaining all about the place and the people."

"And when I get there, what shall I be expected to do? What is to be my vocation?"

"I trust that you will conduct yourself with more propriety than you have ever done here."

"Surely I am not going to America to learn propriety. You might as well suggest that I should go out to the Far West to study English grammar or vocal music."

"When you have acquired sufficient knowledge of farming as practised there, we will consider the advisability of your buying a farm and settling there altogether."

"But suppose I don't want to settle there altogether?"

"We will discuss that later. When you are of age you will be free to do as you please."

"But why should I go in this hurry? Why not make it three months hence?"

"Because I cannot keep you here any longer; you are perfectly incorrigible."

"Very well; then let me go to a tutor's somewhere near here."

"No."

"You forget that I have not yet completed my education."

"You will never study in England. Besides, if you are to be a big farmer in America, you have had all the English school education you will ever need."

"I haven't said yet that I will be a farmer."

"I have made the arrangements for you to go, and, once more I say—go, you must. You will come to London with us to-morrow, and from there I will take you to Liverpool a few days later."

"As soon as that?"

The boy was dismayed now. He realised that this meant that he was at once thus ruthlessly to be torn away from the only two friends he possessed—Mrs Carlisle and her daughter.

The picture of Violet's sweet face rose before him, and he shuddered at the idea of the pain which, he felt sure, his departure would cause her. And then all the happy afternoons that he had spent in her company, all the pleasant little chats they had held, came vividly back to his mind. Then he portrayed her to himself, sobbing violently when he told her this wretched news, and the imaginary sight swept away all weakness and fear from his system, and kindled a raging passion.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS CARLISLE'S TRUST.

WHEN Arthur Vallance left his uncle's study he was a changed youth. Resentment at the unkind treatment of which he was a victim surged within him, and deep despair at the idea of going out friendless and alone to a foreign country, thousands of miles away, depressed his spirit. His life had never been bright ; it now seemed darker than ever.

The spirit of adventure is, it is true, supposed to be a prominent characteristic of a healthy English lad, but it could hardly be expected that a boy of seventeen, about to be exiled under such circumstances as Arthur's, entirely alone, and going to strangers of whom he knew nothing, would be much sustained by that spirit.

In addition to this, however, the parting from his two friends at River Lawn, the absolute relinquishing of Violet's society—the Violet whom his young heart throbbed for

quite as passionately as could ever throb the heart of a man ten years his senior—enveloped him in a cloud of gloom and misery.

From the house he stalked forth across the lawn, through the park, down to the river, feeling bitter, vindictive, and hopeless, and mentally registering himself as a recruit to the army of unbelievers. His young life had been darkened and palled by a stern, and rigid, and narrow discipline, unsoftened even by a spark of humanity or a word of kindness, and it was not to be marvelled at that he suddenly decided for himself that this was wrong and distorted, and that it would be better to discard all faith than to be tortured in this manner.

Arrived at the river, he proceeded to the boat-house, and, launching a canoe, paddled off to River Lawn, and there found Mrs Carlisle and her daughter reading in their little library. These at once divined, by his gloomy looks and his early visit, that something unusual had happened.

“How black you look!” exclaimed Mrs Carlisle, after she had shaken hands with him.
“More rows?”

“Yes,” he said, “more rows; but perhaps this is the last. I am to go away to-morrow.”

"To-morrow!" they both cried simultaneously.

"Yes, to-morrow; to America."

"Your uncle is daring to send you so far away?" asked Violet. "Take my advice and refuse to go. I don't believe he can compel you to leave the country."

"No, he can't; but he can turn me out of his house, and send me to any place in England he likes."

"Don't go; don't go!" she reiterated; "I don't want you to go. You can come and live with us."

"Hush, Vie," said her mother, "you mustn't be too hasty in your counsels. He hasn't told us yet what he is to do when he gets there."

"I am supposed to be going to learn farming. It is the first time I have ever heard of such a suggestion, and I have certainly never given a hint that I had any desire to till the American soil. From the printed prospectuses I took off my uncle's table, one would imagine that the wheat fields grow grains of solid gold, that the cattle, when killed, suddenly transform into ribs and haunches of the same metal, and that, if you are ever hard up in that land of plenty, all that is necessary is to pluck a few dollars from the trees."

"And yet," said Mrs Carlisle, "if what I often read be true, it is all a delusion and a snare."

"I daresay it is; but if I were sure of being able to get back whenever I wanted, I would not refuse to give it a trial. What I fear is, that once out there I shall never be able to return."

"Why not?" inquired Violet.

"Because one can't travel without money, and my uncle will doubtless take care that the funds with which he provides me will never be sufficient to meet the expenses of a long railway journey, and of an ocean voyage. He is not sending me out there from any considerations for my own welfare; he is doing it for the purpose of getting rid of me."

"But," interrupted Violet, "he sha'n't succeed in that. We will baffle him there. If you go, and I don't want you to go; but if you do go, mother shall provide you with enough money to pay all your expenses home if you don't like the place, and want to come back. You can repay us when you are of age."

"I will do that," said Mrs Carlisle calmly. "Before you go now I will lend you enough

to bring you back from the farthest point in America."

Then, addressing her daughter, she said,—

"I wish, dear, to have a few words with Arthur alone. You go and practise in the drawing-room for a little while."

Violet left the room, and her mother motioned to Arthur to sit opposite to her in the bow window. No sooner had her child disappeared from her sight than she became pre-occupied and still more serious. For a few minutes she gazed thoughtfully out of the window, and then, suddenly turning to young Vallance, she said,—

"I think, perhaps, it may be good for you to see a little of the world now, and it certainly will be of use to you hereafter. Therefore, although Vie and I will miss you terribly, I advise you to go, and as I have said already, I will see that you are always in a position to retrace your steps."

"I have no claim upon you," he replied, "and I really cannot accept money from you. You are the only two friends I have ever had in my life, but I cannot take your money."

"In a few minutes you will have a claim upon me," she replied; "and the demand I am going to make upon you will justify you

in accepting loans from me. I feel sure now that I can repose confidence in you."

"Indeed you can," he answered eagerly ; "not only for your own sake, but because I love Vie."

The widow smiled slightly. She had but little faith in the loves and constancy of men, but some strange intuition bade her believe in the sincerity of this stripling before her.

"Will you promise me, on your word of honour, to keep what I am going to tell you a secret, and to faithfully comply with the request I am going to make of you, if necessity arises ?"

"I not only promise it," he said, "but I swear it."

"That is enough for me," she replied. "I believe that you will stick to your promise under all circumstances."

"You may depend upon my doing so," he answered, rising from his chair, and leaning against the window ; "although, when I left my uncle's study about an hour ago, I repudiated and cast aside all the cruel doctrines that have been hammered into me ever since I can remember, and although I have long been numbered by Mr Redwood among the lost ones, I will be faithful to you and Vie.

My unhappy boyhood expired with the last remnant of belief in the religion I have been brought up in, and I have suddenly become a full-blown man. I know it! I feel it! But the annihilation of my faith in Uncle, and his monstrous dogmas, can have no effect on my affection for you, and my love for Vie. I shall still be a gentleman with a heart, a conscience, and feelings of honour."

"I am sure of it," was her response; "and it is on account of my belief in you that I want to enlist you as a firm friend of Vie's. You may think me a weak and foolish woman when I tell you that a dark presentiment possesses me that some evil is about to befall us. I cannot shake it off. I cannot ridicule it away. In my own mind, I feel convinced that some catastrophe will happen to me before long, and then it is likely that Vie may need your friendship and assistance."

"She shall certainly have them; but why yield to these evil forebodings? They are gruesome and unnatural."

"Perhaps they are, but I cannot shake them off. However, listen to me now."

Arthur Vallance returned to his chair, sitting down opposite his companion.

"Of course," Mrs Carlisle continued as

soon as Arthur was settled, "although your innate gentlemanliness has always prevented your even hinting or showing that you thought there were any mysteries connected with myself, I know that you must have realised that there were ; that Vie and I would not hide in this seclusion without cause."

"Of course, sometimes such an idea has entered my head," he answered, "but I have been so fond of you both that I felt it was wrong to try to penetrate your secrets, or even to puzzle my head about them."

"That shows your noble disposition ; but I daresay you have heard that I was supposed to be a mad woman in charge of a keeper."

"Yes, I heard some such rot as that."

"That emanated from the vicar's wife, as also did another report, that if I were not mad, I was a lady hiding away with an illegitimate child—a lady ashamed to show her face to the world."

"It is an infamous suggestion."

"I assure you it is not true," and here for the first time Mrs Carlisle became excited and emotional.

"I know it isn't," he urged consolingly ;

but even if it were, it would not matter to me. I might be sorry for your sake, but I love Vie, and I should love her just as much if you had never been married. Nothing could ever make me love her less."

"Well, I would like to finish now what I was going to say. It may seem morbid and stupid to act on a presentiment, but to a certain extent I have done so. You remember my going up to London a few days ago?"

"Yes, quite well. I came to tea with Vie the same afternoon."

"I went in connection with the presentiment of approaching trouble which is weighing upon me. I went to examine a box of valuable private papers which is in the vaults of the Safe Deposit Company in Chancery Lane, and to add to it a written statement. This is the secret that I am going to confide to you. That box contains my history, and other things for Vie. So long as I am alive and well, it will be unnecessary for you to act in the matter, but if anything should happen to me, I want you and Violet to take that box as soon as she is twenty-one, and open it. When you have opened it, and learnt all that the papers it contains have to

tell, you and Vie must decide as to what her action is to be."

"I will do exactly as you wish if occasion ever arises, but I am sure it will not. You and Vie will live together long after she is twenty-one."

"I hope so ; but still I feel nervous about the future in regard to myself. I feel as though something would happen to me before long, and if my fears should prove true, you will be Vie's only friend. She will not be in any danger, and I don't fear any harm for her personally, but she has certain rights over which I am appointing you guardian, subject to her direction. Those rights are locked up in that box, and if its whereabouts should ever be discovered by a certain person, he may try to deprive her of them."

"I will take care never to divulge it to a living being."

"I believe you, and trust in you. You are really only a boy ; but I am treating you as a man, reposing confidence in you, and making you my child's guardian. As you know, I have no other man friend in the world, and I dare not trust a woman in such a case as this. Martha is very faithful and honest ; but she might not be able to with-

stand the temptation of a large bribe. She can, it is true, hold her tongue—a rare and valuable characteristic in our sex—but I have never trusted her in my secret affairs. As for Vie, I have not yet breathed a word of these things to her, although I intend shortly to tell her of the existence and hiding-place of that box."

"And she and I will be the only two who will know about it? Is that so?"

"Yes; and unless you are guided by some very potent reasons you are not to open it until she is twenty-one."

"And what about the key?"

"I have two. One I have carefully hidden, and the other I shall give to you. You must always keep it by you, and never mention it to any one. It is a plain, unlettered key, and can tell no tale itself."

"But how am I to be Vie's guardian and go to America as well? Of course I must refuse to go now."

"No, you must go. I want you to learn a little bit of the world, so that you will be better able to make your own way and befriend my daughter. It is not so very far away; we can soon bring you back. One thing I beg of you is, always to keep by you

sufficient ready money to pay your expenses home to this spot at a moment's notice. I am going to give it to you now, and if you need more you can write and I will send it."

"I don't believe I shall stay long; for I cannot imagine myself being without Vie. It will be too lonely. Yes, I will always be prepared to return at any moment—the instant you or Vie say 'Come,' I shall start. And when I am returned you will let me be engaged to Vie?"

The mother smiled, and gave her head a little shake.

"You are only two very young children yet," she replied, "and neither of you knows anything of the world. If, when you both are much older, you are still so fond of each other, I should be glad enough to trust my darling to you, but you have a long time to wait yet; and, besides, you will have to see the contents of the box first. Love at your age, my boy, is not remarkable for its duration, although, to tell you the truth, I feel confident that if you do not always love Vie as you love her now, you will, nevertheless, be her steadfast and very dear friend."

"I shall always love her as I do now," he answered, straightening himself up and look-

ing almost indignant; and then, as though he saw something ludicrous in the situation, he added:—"One minute you think me old enough to be Vie's guardian, and the next minute you say I am too young to be her lover, and too young to be even constant to her. I am afraid I am too much of a child to take charge of that key. If I can't be constant to Vie I can't be faithful to you."

Mrs Carlisle rose from her chair, and, stepping to his side, patted him gently on the head, saying,—

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, and I insist on your retaining the trust I have reposed in you. You are not a bit like other boys of your age, and if, a few years later, Vie is fortunate enough to possess your love she will be a very lucky girl."

He raised her hand to his lips, kissed it reverently, and said,—

"You and Vie are all the friends I have ever had. My heart could never again expand towards any one as it has towards you; my soul could never again go out to another soul as it has gone out to Violet."

"I believe you," she answered; "and now I will give you the money and the key. We shall be perfectly destitute of companionship

and a friend after you have gone ; but I think it best that you should give it a trial, if only a very short one. I have reasons for saying this, of which you do not know. Under the circumstances, I believe compliance with your uncle's commands to be necessary for your own good."

"Then it is settled. I will go."

"That is right. And you will always bear in mind the task I have imposed on you ? If anything should happen to me, you will aid Violet in whatever she may wish to do after examining the box ?"

"Of course I will."

"It may seem foolish and strange to entrust this affair to you, especially when you are just going away ; but the truth is, that Violet and I haven't a friend in the world except yourself, and, young as you are, for some reason or other, each of us have unbounded faith in you. I could not, if I wished, call upon any one else ; for our condition is absolutely friendless. This sweet little place is a convent for me, in which I renounced the world a dozen years ago."

CHAPTER V.

EXILED.

WHEN Violet returned to the drawing-room she found her mother and Arthur both looking very serious and thoughtful ; but she herself was far too deeply submerged in the depths of woe for her to make any attempt to brighten them, and she sat down near Vallance with an air of weariness and dejection that went straight to his heart.

Of the three, she probably regretted most the separation that was about to take place. For nearly eighteen months this youth had been her constant companion during some portion of almost every day, and frequently, for an hour before she could reasonably expect him, she had stood in the bushes at the edge of the cliff, looking down the river for the first sight of his little craft. His visits had been the sole relief to the life of unvarying monotony which she and her mother led at River

Lawn, and he was the only companion or friend of either sex that she had ever possessed. And now she realised, with an intensity of pain and distress, which an older girl, and one more experienced in the world, might have been incapable of suffering, that no longer need she wait and watch for his familiar figure to turn the bend of the river, for it would never come, neither would his jovial voice—the more jovial for the suppression it underwent at home—ring through the garden calling for “Vie.” All this was past now, and there would be nothing to which she could look forward to break the dense solitude in which she and her mother lived.

In the mornings Mrs Carlisle would act her part as her child’s governess, resuming her true *rôle* as an indulgent parent again as soon as the lessons were over, and that was the way in which it appeared this young and companionless life must drag through its existence.

Arthur Vallance did not go back to Redwood House for luncheon, but remained with his two friends until late in the afternoon ; and then came the moment for parting and saying a last farewell.

Mrs Carlisle controlled her feelings, and kissed the unhappy youth sadly and gently ;

but Violet, with a sudden outburst of uncontrollable passion, flung herself in his arms, put her own arms round his neck, and clung to him wildly and sobbed piteously. Then he made an heroic effort to act the part of a man, and, dashing back his own tears and overcoming the huskiness which clouded his voice, endeavoured to console her with promises of a speedy return and predictions of a happy future together for them both. Then came the wrench. Putting her away from him into her mother's arms, he rushed out into the garden, down to the river, flung himself recklessly into the canoe, which almost overturned from the impetus of the movement, and paddled savagely down the stream.

The frame of mind in which he arrived at his uncle's house was far from being a conciliatory one ; and when he beheld his relative standing in the hall, looking more morose and stern than ever, feelings of hatred and scorn not only took complete possession of him, but revealed themselves most unmistakably in the fierce scowl with which he met Mr Redwood's severe gaze of rebuke and displeasure.

" You have disobeyed me again," exclaimed his uncle.

" No, I have not disobeyed you," he replied,

hotly. “I don’t acknowledge that I owe you any obedience ; and although I intend to go to America, I don’t intend to acknowledge your authority any more, either before I go or after I return.”

A lugubrious and disagreeable smile played round the corners of Mr Redwood’s mouth, as he answered,—

“It will be time enough to discuss what you will do on your return, when you have returned. Until I have reason to believe that there has been a change for the better in your evil nature, and that you have in fact undergone a complete reformation, I shall not consent to your coming back.”

“Sha’n’t you ? I shall probably come back, whether you consent or not.”

“There are such things as railway and steamship tickets, which have to be purchased with money,” he remarked.

“These are not insurmountable difficulties,” Arthur answered, looking defiantly at his guardian. “When I want to come back, I shall find my way ; and if you threaten me any more like that, I won’t go.”

“You are bad and depraved enough for anything. But I will argue with you no more. I have done my duty towards you ; and if

you insist on going to perdition, I cannot save you."

"When do I start? The sooner the better, for the sooner I shall return."

We go to town in the morning, and on the following day I shall take you to Liverpool and put you on the steamer for New York. It will be a long time before you see this part of the country again."

"Not so long as you think, perhaps," he answered. And then, after a moment's pause, with that hasty indiscretion peculiar to angry youths, he added,—"If you and your home here were all that I had to come to see, I should never want to come; but there is another attraction, which will draw me to this neighbourhood in spite of all obstacles."

"What?"

"*Amor omnia vincit*," Arthur replied; and added,—"You are fond of quotations; do you remember that?"

"I see no reply in it to my question."

"Try again."

"Don't talk to me in that flippant manner. What can a youth like you have to do with love? It will be time enough for you to think of such a thing when you have changed your heart and mended your ways."

“ Will it ? ” retorted the boy, aggravated at his uncle’s contemptuous manner. “ Then let me tell you that I am not only in love myself, but that I am loved. Put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

“ And, perhaps, now you are going to tell me that one of my housemaids is the happy creature, and that she has consented to go to America with you.”

“ My tastes are on as high a level as yours, any day. But I will tell you who she is—Violet Carlisle, the young lady at River Lawn, the girl to whom, for a year and a half, I have gone for consolation and refuge when your fault-findings have nearly driven me out of my senses.”

“ You have been going there so long as that ? ”

“ Not quite—nearly. Don’t sneer at Violet or her mother, for I won’t stand it. No one shall ever say a word against them in my presence.”

“ I know little about them, and therefore can say nothing. I think, though, that they have acted very wickedly and very foolishly in encouraging you to visit them. Have they ever told you anything about themselves ? ”

“ I shouldn’t tell you if they had.”

"Not even when you have uttered your childish protestations of undying love to the daughter of no one knows whom, haven't they offered any explanation of their hiding themselves away from the world in this suggestive manner?"

"Their private affairs are neither your business nor mine. I don't quite catch the drift of the word 'suggestive.'"

"Really, you blend innocence and deceit splendidly. I merely meant that their extraordinary mode of living suggests some dark part—something black and evil in the elder woman's career—something that would stamp her as unfit for the society of any decent person."

"Your suggestion, then, is infamous; as infamous as your religion, which teaches that only one person can ever attain salvation, and that person is Mr Allen Redwood. Every one in the world except yourself is, according to you, wicked and vile, and predestined to eternal torture. Out upon such a creed!"

"You have not told me whether you have proposed to, and been accepted by, this fascinating nymph of the cliff, who is evidently so ashamed of herself or her parent that she seldom dares to show her face even to the

hares and rabbits in the woods by which she is so opportunely surrounded."

"Yes, I have proposed, but she has not accepted me. Both she and her mother said that we were too young to make any promises. The consequence is that I shall wait, and when I come back I shall have seen more of the world, and I shall be older."

"You certainly will be older."

"Not so old, probably, as you imagine."

"We shall see. You had better go and pack."

"Are you going to provide me with an outfit?"

"You will hardly need one, if you are coming back so soon."

"Then I may have to come back still sooner to get it."

Mr Redwood said no more, but putting on his hat, stepped out on to the lawn, looking angry and worried. He had always ruled his nephew with such a rod of iron, and the chastisements and harangues, which for many years the youngster had endured, had been so numerous and sharp, that it came upon the uncle as a severe blow to find that his power and authority were gone, that the worm had turned at last and was in open

rebellion, the rebellion being of such a resolute and defiant nature as to render utterly hopeless all attempts to crush it.

For some time, wrapt in gloomy meditation, he strolled up and down the lawn in front of the house, and did not enter until it was time to dress for dinner.

In the morning, Arthur Vallance, accompanied by his uncle and aunt, travelled to London, and on the following day Mr Redwood took him to Liverpool, and, after purchasing for him a few things which he was not likely to need, and omitting to purchase many things which he was sure to require, the guardian saw his ward safely embarked on the White Star steamer, and left Liverpool by the next train.

CHAPTER VI.

CORA BLANCHARD.

WITH gloom and melancholy plainly depicted upon his brow, Arthur Vallance trod the deck of the *Majestic*, as that huge steamship glided down the Mersey. Ever and anon he would stand and watch the fast-receding shore, wondering to himself if Violet were thinking of him at that particular moment; and then, when turning to resume his walk, he would knit his brows, clench his fists in his pockets, and mutter beneath his breath a word or two that did not sound like the gentle murmurings of love.

No one spoke to him; no one appeared to take any notice of him; in that large crowd of chattering and laughing passengers not a single person seemed to be aware of his existence. In that enormous floating hotel, with its population of several hundred people, he felt more solitary than he had ever felt when paddling

about by himself in his little canoe on the river in Gloucestershire.

In spite of all the men and women by whom he was surrounded, in spite of the liveliness and gaiety of his numerous fellow-passengers, in spite of the brisk and elastic footfalls of many pairs of masculine and feminine feet on the deck, he could have cried aloud,—

*“Alone, alone; all, all alone;
Alone on a wide, wide sea.”*

At dinner he found himself seated beside a cheerful-looking young American lady who, after casting two or three side glances at him, arrived at the commendable determination to rally him out of his despondency, and notwithstanding his monosyllabic replies to her first ventures, she at last succeeded in melting his reserve and inducing him to talk. Gratified at her success, and sympathising with the lonely feelings by which she saw he was oppressed, when finally the long meal was over, she invited him to take a walk on deck with her.

That infallible stimulant to a jaded and careworn man, the presence and chatter of a lively and pretty American woman, was not without its influence upon the torn and wounded heart of this youth. He came out

of his gloomy ponderings ; he even began to see things in a more cheerful light ; he decided that perhaps the world was not so bleak after all. And when he found that his new acquaintance seemed interested in him, and felt her neat little gloved hand pressed lightly upon his arm, his heart expanded towards her, and he told how he was being sent out alone to Dakota, and how wretched and miserable he felt about it. Then she asked him his age, and he answered that he was only seventeen.

"Your father ought to be pretty well ashamed of himself, I guess," she said, tossing her head back, and looking him boldly in the face. "We don't treat our young men in America in that way."

"I have no father," he answered. "My uncle is my sole guardian. He has control of my money until I am twenty-five, and of me until I am twenty-one."

"What sort of a man is he? A queer lot, I should think, to treat you in this manner. Family too big?"

"Only two sons."

"What is he like?"

"He's not so bad to those he cares for, but to me he's stern, unkind, and much given to preaching."

"A bad lot," she replied meditatively, "a very bad lot. The man who loves to hear himself preach is always a bad lot." She spoke so quaintly and with such a *naïve* seriousness of manner that Arthur Vallance could not refrain from laughing.

"Are his sermons of a theological, socialistic, or scientific nature?" the young lady asked.

"They are exclusively devoted to proving that there is no escape for me from eternal punishment," answered Arthur, his spirits rising and his ire towards his uncle increasing as he realised that in this American girl he had found a companion of a kindred mind.

"Hardly the sort of individual to be utilised as a missionary," she rejoined, "for the heathen would scarcely see the advantage of being converted, if all they had to expect from the change were everlasting torture in furnaces and volcanoes."

"That is the sort of doctrine he has hammered into me all my life."

"And a very bad one it is—to say nothing of its being old-fashioned and disgustingly cruel. And what effect has it had on you?"

"When I was smaller it used to frighten me, and I was always wondering why I was ever sent into the world if it were for such an

end as that ; but now I am grown up and have thought so much about it, I have decided that it is better and happier to be an Atheist. I think I am one."

"I think not, young man. You are hardly old enough yet to realise what such a thing means. There is *viâ media* between the unauthorised and ridiculous extreme from which you have revolted and the unreasonable extreme to which you are willing to resort. You know

By night an Atheist half believes a God.

Consequently there are very few real Atheists."

"Aren't there a lot in your country ?"

"No ; really very few, I should think. You see, we haven't many men in the States like the one you describe ; we are too liberal-minded. He must run a regular Atheist factory."

"He didn't preach at anybody but me."

"So much the better for everybody else. But leaving him alone now—he doesn't abound in interest—tell me all about your prospects in Dakota, and how your uncle first heard of the place to which you are going. I don't know Dakota, because, you see, we live in Chicago when we are at home—which

has not been very much the last few years, for I have been at school in England and France, and travelling all over Europe since."

Arthur Vallance then told this girl all that he knew about the arrangements made by his guardian, and so much at home did he feel in her presence, and with such confidence did she inspire him, that he even related the story of River Lawn and its inmates, and how his acquaintance with the latter had led to his exile. He omitted, however, for some reason, to speak of his love for Violet Carlisle; but his new friend, with that infallible instinct possessed by many women, at once divined that something was being kept back.

"And how old is this Miss Violet?" she asked.

"About sixteen," he answered, betraying some embarrassment under the steady and half-quizzical gaze with which she had fixed him.

"And your uncle was afraid of your falling in love with her—which, of course, you had already done?"

The youth blushed, and then replied in the affirmative.

"Dakota," the young lady continued, "was hardly the place to send you to cure you of

your passion. It is a land of big-footed and big-waisted women, who, instead of inspiring you with a counter-passion, will only serve as foil to your *petite* Venus in England, and cause you to dream of her trim little figure and her bewitching face more than ever. Distance, large waists, big feet, muscular arms and slangy talk will turn your love into worship."

"What would you have recommended?"

"Several months in society in Chicago, Boston, or Baltimore, where dozens of girls would have turned your head in a month, and where you would have been safe from entanglement on account of the number with whom you would be in love."

"You evidently haven't much opinion of my constancy."

"Boy as you are, I am not quite certain that you may not be constant to this girl, although you know the verse—

*Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more ;
Men were deceivers ever :
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.*

In my opinion, the one thing to make you constant was to exile you to an outlandish place like Dakota. However, we will try and

make it pleasant for you on board, and tomorrow I will introduce you to my father. He sits at the other side of me at the dinner-table. I think it is a very risky thing to send an unsophisticated boy like you, who knows nothing of the world, all alone into a strange country so far away from home. Do you mind my telling my father about it?"

"Oh, no," replied Arthur; "what does it matter whom you tell? I have never done anything to be ashamed of."

"I am sure you haven't. But it will be a good thing to tell father, because he may be able to help you. He's what they call a 'big man' out West. He's president of the Chicago and South-Western Railway, one of our biggest railway systems, and he's a director of the Kansas City Pork-packing Company. In fact, he has an interest in several big concerns. He has helped more young men than any one I ever knew. Nothing pleases him so much as to be able to point to a man who is known to be prosperous and say, 'I started him on his first venture. I lent him money and gave him a bit of advice, and the two combined made him.'"

"He must be a jolly fellow."

"Of course he is. There's no canting non-

sense about him. He's plain-spoken and straightforward, and his heart is as big as a water-melon. He'll just as soon help ex-convicts, if he thinks they are trying to better themselves, as he will help his best friend. When I tell him your story he will be interested in you at once."

"It's awfully good of you. I think your heart must be as big as you say his is. I don't feel half so lonely or blue since I've been with you."

"I didn't intend you should. It would be a very poor compliment to me if you did. But as soon as I leave you'll feel as lonely as ever, and you must bear up against it like a man. You'll be thinking of your absent Violet, and your heart will ache, and your throat will experience a choking sensation when you reflect that every revolution of the screw is taking you further and further away from her; but you must try and be equal to the occasion, and remember that the foundation of success in this world is pluck, resolution and energy. You are very young—far too young to have been launched by yourself on the sea of life without anyone to assist you in navigating the troublous waves which will at once commence to sweep your course, but as you have been so

launched, you must make up your mind to battle like a man, and take my father's motto, *nil desperandum*, as your watchwords. There," she added, after a slight pause, "I am sure that little harangue would have done credit to my father. It contained about the pith of all his orations to young men. And now I am going below. We will meet at breakfast to-morrow. My name is Cora Blanchard ; yours is ? "

"Arthur Vallance."

"Good-night, Mr Vallance."

CHAPTER VII.

ARTHUR MAKES NEW FRIENDS.

AFTER Miss Blanchard had disappeared through the hatchway, young Vallance wandered about the deck for a few moments, and then turned into the smoking-room. Here he found a large assembly of men sitting about in groups, and at card tables, and on some of the tables he noticed coins of gold and silver.

It was the first time in his life that he had ever seen card-playing for money, and as he glanced round at the faces of the players he reflected that gaming was one of that long category of sins for which his uncle asserted there was no pardon. Indeed, he had understood from his upright and straight-laced guardian that the paste-boards themselves were vicious and ruinous, even when not associated with gambling. He looked long and wonderingly at the various little parties, all seeming so happy and contented, and entirely failed to detect in their counte-

nances any signs of that total depravity which he had been led to believe must be plainly depicted in the features of every one who handled the "devil's picture cards."

His meditations were interrupted by a member of a group of four sitting near, inviting him to join in a game of poker.

"I don't understand the game at all," he replied.

"Soon learn," persisted the other. "You can't lose much ; we are playing very low."

He felt sorely tempted to accept the invitation and see if the game would relieve him from the feelings of loneliness and despondency which oppressed him as heavily as ever since Miss Blanchard's cheery voice and lively companionship had taken their departure. His hesitation, however, attracted the attention of a bluff, jolly-looking individual, who was playing at a table only about a yard away from where Arthur stood. This gentleman, catching young Vallance's eye, beckoned him to his side, and said in a low tone,—

"Sit by me and watch us play at this table if you like, but never learn a game like poker from a party of strangers, especially on an Atlantic liner. That gang would clean you out in one evening."

Arthur didn't quite understand what "cleaning out" signified, but he arrived at a fair idea of its meaning, and a conviction forcing itself into his mind that his new adviser was friendly disposed towards him, he took a seat just behind the man's elbow, and watched him win and lose sovereigns and five-pound notes with a *sang froid* and a nonchalance that, to his inexperienced mind, seemed absolutely astounding. Time and time again the pool in the middle of the table consisted of a larger sum of money than the youth had ever seen in bulk, and yet neither his friend, nor any of the other players, showed the slightest excitement while playing for it, nor the least signs of disappointment or elation when some one of them would finally rake it in.

Then he furtively contemplated the man's face, being gratified and pleased by the kindly look of benevolence and good-nature which was stamped thereon, and he contrasted it with the picture of the gambler which had always been held up to his view—not a likeness of a pleasant, courteous, kind-hearted looking fellow like this one, but a portraiture of a greedy, vicious-looking creature, with scowling face and staring eye-balls, avarice written in every feature, and a generally murderous mien.

For about two hours he watched the players, and then, when the game was over, the man who had counselled him not to gamble with strangers, turned round to him and asked,—

“ You’re travelling alone, I guess, aren’t you ? ”

“ Yes,” replied Arthur.

“ Know any one on board ? ”

“ Not a soul except the girl I sat next to at dinner, and I never saw her until to-night.”

The man smiled and continued,—

“ Oh ! what did you think of her ? ”

“ I thought she was awfully nice — and pretty.”

“ I am with you in that opinion. She’s one of the finest girls that ever trod the deck of a steamer ; and there isn’t any mincing nonsense about her, either.

“ Do you know her ? ”

“ Yes ; I have known her for some little time. You were thinking of playing poker with those men over there ? ”

“ I did feel rather inclined to try a game. I was feeling so stupid and lonely by myself.”

“ I knew you were thinking of playing, for I was watching you. Now, look here, you take my advice and don’t touch cards on board this ship. If you do, you’ll come to grief. There are

sharers who travel on these boats for the sole purpose of gambling, and young men like you are always the prey they pounce upon. They don't tackle old rounders like me. Cards are bad things for very young men, and often lead up to ruin and disgrace. Let 'em alone till you're a bit older, and have had a little experience in tussling with the world. A card player at your age can only hold one position, and that is the position of 'pigeon.' Good-night, young man."

In the morning, when, after a somewhat restless night, Arthur entered the saloon and took his seat at the breakfast-table, he found Miss Cora Blanchard already occupied in disposing of buttered toast and a very substantial mutton chop.

"You are very lazy on this beautiful morning," she said, greeting him with a friendly smile. "My father and I have been on deck for over an hour, and hence our very ravenous appetites. Let me introduce you to my father."

Arthur bent forward and looked at Miss Blanchard's companion, and instantly recognised the benevolent and pleasant-faced man who had interfered to prevent his learning the beauties of the game of poker, and had after-

wards given him a brief lecture on the evils of young men gambling.

"I think we met last night, and are, therefore, not quite strangers to each other," said the elder man, nodding across his daughter at Arthur.

"Yes," said young Vallance; "you very kindly gave me a bit of advice which I intend to follow. I didn't realise how good it was until after I had gone to bed and overheard two fellows in the adjoining cabin chuckling over the manner in which they had inveigled some poor chap to play with them, and had won a lot of money from him."

"I daresay they were some of those who wanted you to play. If you had got mixed up with them, they would have had all the ready money you've got with you long before we sight Sandy Hook. I don't know what your means are, but from what my daughter has been telling me, I should reckon you haven't got more than you require."

"Indeed, I haven't. I've got just enough to take me to my destination, and, if the necessity should arise, to take me back to England again."

"All the more reason you should be careful not to risk any of it on a game you don't

understand. A smart man never plays poker or baccarat with a lot of strangers—it's a foolish policy. But a youth like you shouldn't play at all. You are going out to Dakota?"

"Yes, for a time, at all events."

"Well, it's a rough country, and you'll miss a good many things you've been accustomed to, and you'll have to accustom yourself to a good many things you won't like. The West isn't what it used to be when Horace Greeley made his famous remark, 'Go West, young man'; and it takes a heap of endurance and determination to do any good out there now. My daughter tells me you are going out to a farm?"

"Yes; somewhere beyond Fargo."

"Ahem! How did your guardian come to decide upon such a place? How did he hear of it?"

"Only through advertisements in the papers."

"The same way as some of our western girls, who have no status at home, hear of titled friends in England who are anxious to look after their social welfare, and to launch them upon the bosom of aristocratic life in London."

Arthur looked incredulous, and did not appear to grasp the entire purport of the

American's remark. Such a thing as buying and selling introductions into English society, and purchasing and bargaining for presentations to Court, had never been heard of in the isolated life in which he had hitherto lived.

"You don't mean," he said, innocently, "that people with titles in England advertise in the papers for friends to come and live with them, and charge for introducing them."

"Some of 'em do," answered Mr Blanchard; "for the advertisements are continually to be seen in our western papers, and it can't be supposed that they are inserted for amusement. However, we don't care anything about that. If your countesses want to sell, and our girls wish to buy, that's their own business, and no one else's. I've nothing to say against it. Our girls are generally smart enough to see that they get an equivalent for their money, which is more than can be said about your men who send their sons out to bleak and dreary farms or tracts of land in the States."

"Then you haven't much of an opinion of this project on which I am being sent out?"

"I can't say that I have; but, you see, I know nothing about it, except that it commenced through a class of advertisement which has been the means of a great deal of swindling

as well as a source of vast trouble and disaster to many Englishmen. That, however, need not discourage you. Having undertaken it you must give it a fair trial, and then if you find it doesn't suit, you must chuck it up and try something else. I daresay I shall be able to give you a helping hand, if occasion arises."

"Yes, indeed he shall," interrupted Miss Blanchard. "I myself will see that he does so, and you shall have our address in Chicago, so that if you want our aid you will know where to write. It is not very far from Chicago to Fargo. Only about thirty-six or forty hours' journey."

"It's awfully kind of you to take so much interest in me," replied Arthur; "especially as I am such a stranger."

Cora Blanchard's face assumed a quaint expression as she answered, "Everyone has to be strangers in the beginning. When I first came into the world I was called 'the little stranger.' You were a stranger to your Violet once."

"To his what?" asked the young lady's father.

"Never mind," replied the young lady; "perhaps we'll take you into that secret later."

At present I am Mr Vallance's sole *confidante*, and shall not betray my trust."

Then Arthur ate his breakfast, and afterwards went on deck to walk with Miss Blanchard. In this young lady and her father he felt intuitively that he had met with friends, and in their presence the weariness and despondency which he experienced so much when alone were always dispelled. Very soon, indeed, he became quite intimate with both of them, and the sturdy independence of the girl, together with her general brightness and freedom from all affectation and artificialness, exercised a beneficial effect upon him.

Any young woman who is the only child of a millionaire can undoubtedly afford to be independent both in her opinions and actions, and can affect whims and fancies that would not always be possible, or perhaps even seem irreproachable in one less favoured by fortune; but there were a genuine ring in everything this girl said, and a pleasing earnestness in everything she did, that stamped her at once as sincere and natural, and void of dissimulation and acting. She might, if she had so chosen, have been surrounded by men from morn till night, instead of spending hours at

a time walking or sitting with young Vallance, for it cannot be expected that a boy of seventeen, who has never been out of his native country, and only seen but very little of that, whose education has been so limited and his training confined in such a narrow groove, could be much of a companion for a smart American girl nearly two years his senior, who has travelled in many lands and mingled in society, as it were, ever since she was old enough to walk; but, nevertheless, Miss Blanchard seemed to find plenty of amusement and interest in the youth's company, and the sympathy which she appeared to feel for him certainly bore no indications of being feigned or assumed.

Arthur Vallance was, of course, both flattered and pleased at the young lady's attention, and speedily realised how much she had done to make the voyage not only passable, but even enjoyable. To him, indeed, she came as a ministering angel to drive away dismal forebodings and gloomy meditations; to instil into him hope and anticipations of success, and to open up in his mind entirely new veins of thoughts.

And so, freed from the bug-bear of his uncle's narrow teachings, relieved from the

sombre depression incumbent on a long era of snubbings, bullying, and assurances of being heir to perdition, under the influence of the bright companionship and genial wit of Cora Blanchard, his character commenced to expand and he himself began to grow more manly, more independent, and more friendly and congenial towards his fellow-man.

Cora's father, also, frequently held long conversations with him, giving him plenty of advice that would be useful in the future, and showing unmistakably the kindly interest he took in the young man's welfare. Mr John Blanchard was a man who presided with genius over numerous industrial enterprises, who managed railways, controlled speculative movements on the exchanges, and ruled his fellow-men in thousands; but he, in turn, was completely under the subjection of one ruler, and that ruler was his pretty and clever daughter. And the curious part of it was, that neither father nor child appeared to be aware of the fetters which the one wrought and the other wore.

CHAPTER VIII.

MINNIE SHARP.

WHEN the big ship arrived at the company's wharf in New York, the time had come for Arthur to bid good-bye to his two friends, it being their intention to remain in the "Empire City" for several days before continuing their journey homewards to Chicago. The whole of the evening before he had spent alone with Cora Blanchard, and had faithfully promised that young lady to write to her and tell her how he was getting on, and to give her all his impressions of his new life, receiving in return her assurances that if he disliked it and found it rougher than he could stand, she would induce her father to find something for him more congenial, unless he should make up his mind to return to England.

And then she had said,—

"Of course you have a revolver? Most men out there carry them, I believe, and

although I think it is a hateful practice, so long as it is universal, it is hardly safe for a stranger to make himself an exception."

"I haven't one," he had answered; "in fact, don't think me silly, but I've never had one in my hands in my life."

"Your uncle ought to have given you one."

Arthur had laughed and replied,—

"My uncle's ideas of self-defence consist of a belief in the efficacy of flight, or, perhaps, a harangue on the wickedness of quarrelling."

"Neither one nor the other would avail much against some of the 'toughs' out West, or against highway robbers. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but certainly the tongue is not mightier than the revolver, neither are heels as speedy as bullets."

"I don't suppose I could shoot straight if I bought one."

"You could after a little practice. I am going to make you a present of one. Father has two beauties, and I will give you one of them. They are Smith and Wesson's latest patent, and of a calibre sufficiently large for all practical purposes."

And the young lady having sought out her father, and obtained his sanction to her giving away one of his pistols, had gone to his

cabin, procured the revolver, and presented it to Arthur, who accepted the weapon gratefully, and after gazing admiringly at it for several minutes, had put it in the inside pocket of his coat.

"Good gracious!" she had exclaimed.
"You are not going to carry it there?"

He had looked embarrassed and discomfitted as he inquired,—

"Where then?"

"Oh," she had said, "I forgot. Of course you have no pistol pocket; what they call a 'hip pocket?'"

"No; I always thought men carried pistols in the breast pocket. One always reads of them being carried there."

"Oh, yes, of course; because the men who write about jerking a revolver from a breast pocket, are generally men who have never had occasion to carry or use one, and have never lived in a country where every man is armed. In America every one carries his revolver in a pocket in the back of the trousers made for the purpose. You might as well put it in your hat as in the inside breast pocket of your coat. And when you wear an overcoat, you must carry it in the right-hand side pocket, so that, if necessary,

you can walk or ride with your hand in your pocket, actually holding your pistol ready all the time."

"I will remember that," he said; "it may be a useful hint."

"Don't think I am of a murderous disposition," she continued, "because I really abhor the rough and ready manner in which some of my countrymen in the South and West dispose of each other's lives, but I know that it is necessary for an inexperienced boy like you to be on your guard."

Arthur had thanked her effusively, and animated by her independent spirit, had assured her that he was confident he should be able to take care of himself, and that he should always treasure the pistol as a gift from one of the noblest and most beautiful girls the world had ever known, and that, if occasion should ever arise, he would use it with the same resolution and courage that she herself would show. Neither of them dreamt, however, how quickly his resolution and courage would be put to the test.

As soon as the ship was made fast to the wharf, Miss Blanchard was deeply immersed in the business of revealing her vast wardrobe to the scrutiny of the Custom House officials,

and for a time Arthur Vallance was forgotten. His own portmanteau was so scantily filled, and what little was in it bore such unmistakable traces of wear and tear, that it was in quite a contemptuous tone the inspector authorised him to fasten it up again. Then he had it put on a cab, and went to bid a last adieu to his two friends. Mr Blanchard shook his hand warmly, and bade him keep up his courage and be of good cheer, adding, as a final consolation,—

“ You’ve got a couple of good friends in me and my daughter. You’ve got our address in Chicago. If you can’t get along after you’ve given that place a fair trial write to us ; we’ll see what we can do. No one who has my daughter for a friend need ever despair ; but keep up your courage, young man, keep up your courage, and don’t weaken at the first defeat. You’ll feel lonely and weepy at first out there all by yourself, but stick to your guns, and call on us if your situation ever becomes too desperate, and under all circumstances let Cora know how you get on. Good-bye, I wish you luck.”

And Cora Blanchard had given him an ungloved hand, which he had raised to his lips and kissed, as she said,—

"Write to me in a couple of weeks and tell me how you are, and how you are getting on. And don't forget your Violet. She will be waiting anxiously to hear from you, and you ought not to delay a moment in writing to her after you get out to Dakota."

"I wrote to her late last night, and posted it on board."

"I took that for granted ; but she'll want to hear all about your new home. Good-bye."

She gave his hand a gentle pressure, and was gone, leaving him almost ready to cry at the vast and dreary feeling of loneliness which once more came over him as soon as he realised that his two friends had actually departed. But the necessity for movement and action brought him to a more practical mood, and getting into his cab, he ordered the driver to take him to the New York Central Railway Depôt. Arrived here, he first inquired for a money-changer's, and having exchanged all his English coin and notes for American currency, he proceeded to the ticket office and bought a ticket for Fargo, *via* Chicago and St Paul. The money which his uncle had given him barely sufficed to pay the actual fare, and left nothing for sleeping car berths or refreshments. Fortunately he had the very liberal

sum which Mrs Carlisle had lent him to ensure his return home if necessary, but bitter feelings of rage and hatred welled up in his bosom as he reflected on the suffering and discomfort he might have had to undergo. His indignation increased, too, when he remembered that this money had been given him by Violet's mother to be kept as a reserve fund to pay his fare and passage back to England, whenever he determined to come.

So he resolved to forego the luxury of a sleeping berth, and to travel in the ordinary passenger coach as far as Chicago, and then, if very tired and worn out, he made up his mind that he would patronise the sleeping cars from that city on to Fargo. A night, though, on an ordinary American railway carriage is about as near an approach to a purgatory as most human constitutions, brought up in decent circumstances, can stand, and midnight had scarcely arrived before Arthur found himself negotiating with the conductor for a berth, and a very few minutes later he was fast asleep in one, dreaming of Cora Blanchard and Violet Carlisle.

In the morning he was awakened by a grinning negro porter, whose ebony visage, flat nose, and enormous lips came upon him as a

severe shock just after his mind had been dwelling upon Violet's classical features.

Having dressed, he went back to the dining-car and, taking a seat at a small table, ordered breakfast. Several other passengers were already occupied in devouring all the good things which the cook was able to provide, and for a short time Arthur's attention was engaged in watching these ; but observing one's fellow creatures is a very different thing to talking and associating with them, and soon the loneliness of his situation impressed itself fully upon him, and, with a deep sigh, he glanced at the vacant seat on the opposite side of his table, and devoutly wished that some one, man or woman, old or young, would come and occupy it.

Scarcely had the desire flitted through his brain, when a daintily attired and exquisitely "got up" young female, with glorious golden hair, big ravishing blue eyes, and a waist that a wasp might have eyed with jealousy, tripped lightly to the table, and, curling her skirt gracefully around her limbs, deposited herself lightly and easily on the seat facing him. For a moment he was supremely delighted to perceive the arrival of this pretty little charmer ; then his delight gave way to embarrassment

as he wondered whether she would speak to him without being introduced, or whether he ought to speak first to her, and finally he found himself landed in deep perplexity and discomfort as his eyes timidly met her amused gaze. She showed no inclination, however, to begin a conversation, and after bestowing a long and inquiring glance upon him, she summoned the waiter and gave her order for breakfast. Then she gazed out of the window, and he studied her profile.

Certainly there was no doubt about her being a pretty woman, he thought, and she looked so bright and genial it was hardly likely that she would sit opposite to him during the whole of her breakfast and never say a word. He himself had known so few young ladies, and his travels had been so limited, that he was quite at a loss to know whether or not it would be a breach of etiquette for him to speak to her. But while he was thus labouring in the slough of doubt, she turned round, and once more scrutinised him with a quizzical, wonder-what-you-are look in her face, that half encouraged and half embarrassed him. Then, while his cheeks were still reddening, and his entire body heating beneath her glances,

he suddenly realised that one of his feet must have wandered over into her territory, and that she was calmly using it as a foot-stool. Quickly drawing it away, he blurted out,—

“I beg your pardon.”

“What for?” she asked, in a pert little voice, that made him feel doubly uneasy.

“For having my feet over at your side of the table,” he replied.

“Oh, is that all? Then my pardon is speedily granted; especially as, to tell the truth, your foot came in very convenient as a rest for mine; but of course I can’t use it, now I know what it is.”

“Let me tell the waiter to bring you a stool,” he said, innocently, turning round to beckon one of the knights of the serviette.

“Oh, no, please don’t,” she urged; and then bursting into a gay laugh, she exclaimed,—
“Say, where do you come from?”

“Gloucestershire,” he answered.

“Where’s that?”

“In England; it is a county.”

“So you are an Englishman. I do like Englishmen! Where are you going to?”

“Dakota.”

“What on earth for?”

“To learn farming, I believe.”

"Poor chappie, what a time you will have of it out there, amidst cyclones and blizzards. Are you alone?"

"Yes; I have come over from England all by myself."

"And are you going to farm all by yourself? You are very young to be wandering the earth in this way; but then I've always heard you English boys are so manly."

"I am going at first to learn farming from a man out there, and after that I don't know what will happen; perhaps I shall go home again."

"And are you going straight through, without stopping to have a look at any of the towns on your way? Surely you will stay in Chicago for a day or two."

Arthur Vallance shook his head, and informed his companion that it was absolutely necessary for him to go direct to his destination.

Then, without appearing to ask impertinent questions, this saucy and inquisitive young lady drew from him the fullest information concerning his affairs and circumstances; and when they had finished breakfast and returned to the sleeping-car, she had succeeded in mak-

ing herself thoroughly acquainted with all the details of the youth's history.

She was indisputably a smart and pleasing girl, although two or three times it occurred to Arthur that she was rather inclined to be bold and forward ; but those qualifications he at once concluded must be a part of the American feminine constitution.

It should be remembered that the first time he had ever met any citizens of the United States was on board ship, only about a week ago, and that, therefore, he was as ignorant of the manners and customs of the people in whose midst he was going to live as he well could be.

This girl interested and amused him, while his inexperience of the world, and his general unfamiliarity with anything approaching the shady side of life, precluded him from feeling mistrust of one so pretty and entertaining.

Seated together in the "sleeper," they talked briskly and glibly, the young lady leaving no effort unmade to produce a favourable impression upon her companion—a task which, taking into consideration his lonely situation and unsophisticated state of mind, was not likely to be a difficult one.

"We don't know each other's names yet,"

she said, after a slight pause had occurred in the conversation. "I am commonly known as Minnie Sharp, although I was originally called Minerva."

"And 'Minnie' is the short of 'Minerva'?"

"Yes. I didn't come up to the expectations formed of me when they called me after the goddess, so they cut it down to 'Minnie.' It comes to the same in the long run. The niggers are so fond of these classical names that I am quite willing they should have a monopoly of them."

"Don't you like niggers?"

"No. Do you?"

"I never saw one till yesterday."

Miss Minnie Sharp burst out laughing, and exclaimed,—

"How real droll never to have seen a nigger! Don't you have any in England?"

"There may be some in London, but I never saw one. There are none in Gloucestershire."

"So much the better for Gloucestershire. Happy is the soil which knows not the impress of the darky's foot."

"But surely they are like other men, except in colour."

"That is the argument of every one who knows nothing about them. All of you English, who have no knowledge of the nigger, gush and moralise over him in a manner that seems simply ridiculous to us Americans. Talk about black and white social equality is nonsense. The two races can't be equal, and never will. How would you like your sister to marry a negro?"

"If I had a sister, I might not like it."

"Of course you wouldn't. That's where the matter hits home. In some of our Northern States I believe such a marriage is held legal, but in the South it is invalid; no amount of form or ceremony can join a nigger to a white. And quite right it is."

"But, if what I have read in the English papers is true, you Americans don't regard marriage as solemnly as we do; you have as many divorces as marriages."

"Well, we do have our fair share of divorces; but my opinion is, that people are all the happier for it. What is the use of compelling two persons who can't get along together to remain man and wife? Why should a poor woman, whose husband is serving a long term in the penitentiary, be compelled to remain tied to him? Surely her very misfortune in

her marriage entitles her to freedom and another chance. And then, again, in your country, although a husband has notoriously deserted his wife, the poor thing is obliged to stay bound to him just the same. Here, in such cases, most of the States grant freedom to either party. There are many cases where the inability to procure annulment of the marriage tie causes great distress and misery. I am in favour of easy divorces. Those are my sentiments, but I don't say that there are not some persons in this country who are opposed to them. The easy divorce people are in the majority, though, by a long way."

"But don't your clergy fight against it?"

"Oh yes, more or less, most of them do, but they don't wield the same influence here as they do in your country. Your bishops, or a lot of them, have seats in the House of Lords. We should just as soon think of giving bishops command of our army and navy as electing them to the Senate or House of Representatives. This would be a 'daisy' country if we had bishops and priests, and ministers of all denominations sitting in Congress, and in the State Legislatures. There would be no divorce then, I daresay, and no liberty either."

"I wish my uncle could hear you talk," said Arthur, laughing; "it would do his gloomy old head good to be compelled to listen to a little logic like yours. He would tell you at once that you were doomed for all time, and that, like myself, you had been sent into the world for the express purpose of arriving at eternal punishment. That is his creed."

"Well, it ain't mine, and I guess I could argue it out with the old man a bit. However, you won't hear much of that sort of talk where you are going now. They haven't time for it. Six days do they work and do all their labour, and on the seventh do they gamble."

"I have never gambled in my life; in fact, I have never had anything to gamble with."

"Well, everybody plays poker out West, or nearly everybody. Sometimes a farmer will drive twenty miles to town on a Sunday morning, in order to have a little game in the afternoon, and drive back again at night. Amusements are very scarce out in those parts. But you haven't told me your name yet?"

"Arthur Vallance."

"Well, Mr Arthur Vallance, we shall be

in Chicago before long now, and I think you ought to stay there a day and night, anyhow. I am not going any further."

"I am sorry, but I really must go straight on. I can't afford to stop at hotels—they are so expensive."

"Very well; you shall go on to St Paul to-night, but as we shall be in Chicago in time for luncheon, you shall lunch with me. Then I will come and see you off at the Chicago and North-Western Railroad Depôt. How does that suit you?"

"It is very kind of you, but won't your friends be at the station to meet you?"

She laughed gaily for a moment, and then said,—

We American girls don't need escorts to meet us at stations in broad daylight. The general public is our protector and *chaperon*. I am expected home to-day, but no one will come to meet me, and no one will bother about me until I get there. I don't think I mentioned the train I was going to travel on. So we will go and lunch together."

"I shall like it very much," he replied. And, in the exuberance of his gratitude, he continued, "How awfully good-natured and warm-hearted you American girls are. You

have no idea how lonely I was feeling when you came and sat opposite to me at breakfast."

"I noticed your dismal look as I came into the car, and I thought to myself, 'that young man needs cheering; he is in want of the sympathy and society of a bright little woman like myself,' and thereupon I came and plumped myself down opposite to you."

"It was very nice of you."

"No, it wasn't," she answered, looking at him half mischievously, and half tenderly; "you are a handsome boy; the girls ain't going to leave you long by yourself."

CHAPTER IX.

ARTHUR HAS A STRANGE ADVENTURE.

As soon as the train arrived at the Lake Shore Dépot in Chicago, Arthur Vallance and his new friend sallied forth in search of luncheon. It did not occur to the former that there was anything queer about a young lady inviting a young man to lunch with her after so very brief an acquaintance, for he had found her so attractive, agreeable, and worldly-wise, that he had the most implicit faith in her knowledge of the *propriétés*. It is true that just as he had descended from the train, carrying Miss Sharp's bag—his own had been handed over to the Express Company for transmission to the North-Western Dépot—he had noticed a sardonic grin overspread the black visage of the negro porter, and had wondered what he had done to make that individual look so knowing and contemptuous ; but the real cause of the darky's

amusement did not flash upon his mind until he was once more *en route* to St Paul.

Miss Minnie was evidently thoroughly acquainted with that great metropolis frequently known as the "Queen of the Lakes," for, after a brief walk, she turned into a quiet little restaurant in a side street, and passing through the main room, ascended a flight of stairs, and entered a small square apartment about as big as an ordinary horse box. Arthur cast his eye around the little chamber, and merely noted that it seemed cool and clean, cosy and comfortable. Then the young lady, after scrutinising her face in the looking-glass, which stood over the chimney-piece, and smoothing a couple of stray locks, touched the bell, and gave her orders for luncheon.

"We will have a real nice little lunch," she exclaimed, after the waiter had departed. "What brand of champagne do you like best?"

"I don't know," Arthur replied. "I have never drank much of it. I couldn't tell one brand from another."

"Well, you dear innocent boy," she answered, walking to his side, and caressing his cheek with her hand, "I will manage it all.

First we will have a real American cocktail to sharpen our appetite, then we will just have one bottle of "Veuve Clicquot," and then we will finish with a *petit verre* of Cognac, and for something more solid I have ordered little neck clams, soft shell crabs—a luxury you have probably never tasted—and a spring chicken with green peas and green corn. I hope you are hungry."

"Indeed I am," he replied. "You see, we breakfasted quite early, and now it's past three o'clock. It is awfully good of you to have invited me. I thought at first you meant to take me to your home to luncheon."

"Oh, no, luncheon would have been over at home, and besides, it is much pleasanter *tête-à-tête* here, don't you think? I infinitely prefer it."

She glanced up into his eyes with an expression that seemed to be full of sentiment and admiration, and the youth's cheeks reddened as he met her gaze. At that moment the waiter brought in a little tray with two cocktails in glasses on it, and Miss Minnie handed one to her companion, and took the other for herself.

"Here's luck," she said, holding up her glass on a level with her eyes, and looking

over it at him, "here's luck to you and a pleasant journey."

They drank the cocktails simultaneously, and then sat down near the window to await the arrival of the repast, she chatting gaily and giving him a brief description of Chicago. Two or three times she gave him wide openings to pay her compliments, and over and over again she cast languishing looks into his eyes, while more than once, when she had leaned over very near to him, her curly tresses brushed his temples, and her soft cheek for a moment touched his beardless face, but her efforts kindled no fire in his soul, and appeared rather to have the effect of making him shy and embarrassed.

Presently a waiter arrived with the first course of the repast, and they both moved their seats to the table.

A good solid luncheon, and half the contents of a bottle of "Veuve Clicquot," appeared to stimulate the spirits of young Vallance, and to warm his heart towards his companion, for gradually he drew his chair nearer to hers, and when once more he felt the warmth of her cheek radiating into his face, he put his arm round her neck, and kissed her lips. She made no demur, but

only looked at him in the same languishing way as before, and with the twinkle in her eyes, and the soft smile playing round her mouth, invited him to do it again, an invitation which he understood and accepted. After a while she rang the bell, ordered the table to be cleared, and coffee and Cognac to be brought. This done, she paid the bill, and then when the door was shut and the waiter gone, she poured out the coffee, putting into it a small quantity of brandy, and handed a cup to Arthur.

The boy had already taken more than he had ever before drank at one time in his life, and unaccustomed to strong drink as he was, it was no wonder that the champagne and the cocktail had had an effect upon him. For the first time in his life he was in a state nearly approaching intoxication—lured into it by a young woman whom, twenty-four hours ago, he had never heard of or seen. When about half of his coffee had been consumed, he seemed to grow drowsy and stupid, and forsaking his chair at the table, he walked unsteadily to a sofa which stood in a corner of the room, and dropped heavily upon it. In a few minutes he was in a profound slumber.

It was late in the evening when he awoke, and opening his eyes, perceived two men standing by his side. For a moment he could not collect his thoughts, and fancied himself back at Redwood House, but a hoarse laugh from one of the men caused him to glance round the room, and then the recollection of his friend and the luncheon came back to him. With the recollection also came the knowledge that he had a splitting headache — a headache exceeding in pain and intensity anything he had ever experienced.

"Well, young man," said one of the two men at his side, "how much longer do you want to sleep here?"

"I've got such a headache," he murmured in response, "such a headache!"

"Oh, well," rejoined the same man, "we'll soon fix that for you. I'll go and get you something that will brace you up in a pair of shakes."

The speaker left the room, and Arthur once more closed his eyes, remaining mute and motionless.

When the man returned he handed Vallance a small glass filled with a white liquid, and, the latter having drank it, told him to remain

quiet for another quarter of an hour, until he came back to him.

At the expiration of that time the man returned and found young Vallance's head better and himself apparently completely recovered from the effects of his little bit of dissipation.

"Who are you?" the youth asked.

"Manager and proprietor of this house," was the answer. "We want this room now. Where's your gal?"

"You mean the young lady I came here with? I don't know; surely she hasn't gone."

"She went out two hours ago, but said she should be back in five minutes, as she was only going across to the drug store. She ain't come back yet. Never will, I guess, now."

"Why not?"

"Well, she ain't the kind to come back, I guess. When they say they are coming back in five minutes, and don't come for nigh three hours, it's a fair verdict to come to that they ain't coming back at all. However, she don't owe us anything. May be you ain't so lucky."

"What do you mean? She certainly doesn't owe me anything. But something

must have happened to her or she would have returned. She was going to the station with me."

"Well, I guess you'll have to go it alone. Known her long? An old friend?"

Arthur Vallance shook his head in answer to the last two questions.

"Just a stray acquaintance, I guess, then?"

"She travelled from New York to Chicago with me in the same sleeping car. That was where I met her."

"You're a bright un! English, I see. Been long in this country? I guess not, eh?"

"I landed in New York yesterday morning."

Then a sudden idea and suspicion shot into young Vallance's brain, and sitting up on the sofa, he felt for the little pocket-book which contained all his money. A sigh of relief escaped him as his fingers found it, and drawing it out, he said—

"She was honest, at all events. She could easily have robbed me."

But as he opened it an exclamation of dismay sounded from his lips, for the side of the wallet in which he had placed the money was empty. There was nothing in the purse but

his railway ticket to Fargo, the check for his luggage, and two or three small papers.

"She has taken every penny I had," he ejaculated, looking up at the proprietor. "Every penny! I am alone here in Chicago, thousands of miles from home, without a farthing. What on earth am I to do!"

He dug his elbows into his knees and buried his face in his hands. For the moment, the wretchedness of his situation appalled and dumbfounded him.

"How much did you have?" was the very natural query which the proprietor first ventured.

"About seventy pounds," was his reply.

"In English money?"

"No; in American money, all paper. I changed it from English to American in New York yesterday."

"Feel in all your pockets."

"That's no good. I always carried it here."

He searched, however, in every pocket, but not a dollar could he find in any of them. Even the loose silver in his trousers' pocket had been abstracted. And this was his first experience of lunching with a strange young lady. She had given him a royal luncheon,

drugged him, and robbed him of every dollar he possessed.

"Who paid the bill?" asked the landlord, looking sympathetically at his despairing young guest.

"She paid," was the reply; "and then re-imburshed herself while I was asleep. That coffee must have been drugged. Good gracious! What an infernal idiot I am! Well, I am done for."

You've got a railroad ticket there. Where's it to?"

"Fargo."

"Got friends there?"

"Not friends, but some people I am going to learn farming from."

"Learn farming, eh? Relatives in good position at home?"

"Yes; my uncle is a country gentleman in Gloucestershire. He is well off."

"Got any papers to identify you?"

"Not here; but I have in my desk in my portmanteau?"

"Where's your portmanteau?"

"I suppose it is at the station. It was checked through to Fargo."

"Got the check?"

He took a small, dirty brass plate, with a

long number on it, from his pocket-book, and handed it to the proprietor.

The landlord looked at it for a moment, and, handing it back, said,—

“That’s right enough. Well, what’s to be done?”

“I suppose I must go to the police at once,” Arthur replied, dismally, “and tell them what a fool I have been. Will you come with me?”

“No; I have no time to be running after the police; besides, darn me if I believe they’ll do any good. That gal’s left Chicago before this. The police will only laugh at you, and tell you to go home to your mother. You’ve been a big idiot.”

“What’s your advice, then?”

“My advice is, that you bear your loss like a man, and don’t go whining about after the police and others. You ain’t fit to be wandering about these parts by yourself, and, perhaps, after all, you had better make tracks for home. You’re a regular young greenhorn, and ain’t fit to be out of sight of your daddy.”

“How can I go home without a shilling? Besides, I wouldn’t if I could. I am obliged to go on to Fargo, but I shall go to the police first.”

"It won't do a bit o' good. The gal's cleared out, I guess."

"Or stop, I know. Mr Blanchard told me if I were ever in distress to go at once to the nearest British Consul. I shall go straight from here."

"His office will be shut before you can get to it. What Mr Blanchard do you mean?"

"He lives here. He is president of the Chicago and South-Western Railway. But, unfortunately, he stopped in New York for a few days. I must go to the Consul, and get him to see the police, and lend me money enough to go on with. I am penniless."

The proprietor's face assumed a serious look as the young man reiterated his determination to go the Consul and the police. The mention of the name of Mr Blanchard had also caused him to change countenance a little. This youth, he thought, might not be so friendless after all, and certainly if the case should be taken up by two such men as Mr Blanchard and the British Consul, the police would be likely to display considerable activity in the matter, and his restaurant would obtain an unsavoury notoriety, which he would infinitely prefer to avoid.

"You'll have to wait till to-morrow to see the Consul," he said, "and then it's a thousand to one against his being able to help you. Even if the police caught the gal, it's a hundred to one that she's made away with the cash somehow or other. It'll cost you a lot waiting here about it."

"But I'm bound to wait. I can't travel without a penny in my pocket."

"How much do you want? Considering that you've been robbed in my place, and that you're so young and helpless, I don't mind lending you a little bit if you don't want too much. I am a hard-working man myself, and need all my business brings in, but I couldn't see a young 'un like you in such a hole without offering a little bit of help. How much do you think will take you to your destination?"

Arthur pondered for a few moments. His head was yet aching, and his mental faculties were still considerably dimmed. Moreover, all energy and spirit seemed to have evaporated out of him.

"I suppose I had better go," he said at last, raising his head to look at his companion. "I feel very sick and ill. Will you lend me ten pounds?"

"It's a good deal, that is," was the reply. "Fifty dollars is a pile of money in these days."

"I've lost seventy pounds—three hundred and fifty dollars—in here," answered Arthur.

"Yes; I believe you have. But still, you see, there's only you're word for it, and the police always throw doubt on these kind of tales. See here; your sleeping-car fare to Fargo will cost you about five or six dollars; your meals will cost you a dollar a-piece—about six dollars altogether; that's eleven or twelve. Now, if you've made up your mind to go to-night, I'll lend you twenty-five dollars, darned if I won't, and I'll trust you to repay me as soon as you are able. That'll give you a balance of at least twelve dollars for any emergency that may arise."

"I am much obliged to you," said Arthur, "and I think I will accept it. I feel awfully ill. I wish I could turn into a bed or a berth or something now."

"What train were you going on?"

"The nine o'clock on the Chicago and North-Western."

"Well, you've not much time to spare. Brace yourself up a bit."

Then the proprietor counted out five five-dollar bills, and handed them to young Vallance, taking a receipt from him for the amount.

This transaction completed, he accompanied the boy to the door, and seeing him into a cab, directed the driver to take him to the North-Western Depôt.

Arthur felt far too ill as he was being whirled through the streets to be able to collect his thoughts or to think calmly over the manner in which he had been recently victimised. All he wanted just at that moment was a bed to lie down upon, a pillow on which he could rest his aching head, and complete solitude. He felt no desire now to rush to the police, no yearning for vengeance against Miss Minnie Sharp, no inclination even to relate his pitiful tale to the British Consul; he was simply overcome by a craving for quiet sleep in which to forget his physical pain, and to drown his sorrow. He had funds enough now to take him to his destination, and for the present he felt that, after his recent experience, he ought to be grateful even for that.

Two hours later he was tucked cosily away in a sleeping berth, buried in a profound

slumber, and oblivious to both past, present, and future.

The “sleep that sometimes shuts up sorrow’s eye” had for the moment banished all pain from his body and trouble from his mind.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRAIN.

IF Arthur Vallance had been a man with any experience of the world, it is possible that he might not have taken so kindly to the advice of the proprietor of the restaurant, in which he had been robbed, that he should continue his travels without seeking the aid of the police or the British Consul ; in fact, had he possessed any experience whatever, the landlord's advice and willingness to lend him the necessary money to accomplish his journey would have caused him to feel doubtful as to whether it was not possible that "mine host" and Miss Minnie Sharp would ultimately divide the proceeds of the robbery. No such suspicion, however, had entered his brain, and he had retired to his berth, feeling deeply grateful to the proprietor for the sympathy and assistance which that individual had extended to him.

All through the long night he slept soundly, undisturbed by the monotonous click-clack of the wheels as they rolled over the rail-joints, or by the noise of passengers and train-men as they passed through the car, or even by the sudden jerks which tossed him about when the engineer every now and then clapped on the air-brakes and brought the train to an abrupt halt. He was so completely exhausted that, unaccustomed even as he was to travelling, he was able to sleep through all the noises and varying motions without a moment's awakening. The consequence was that, in the morning, he rose refreshed and invigorated both in body and spirits.

He was far away from Chicago now, and when he first drew aside the blind and looked out of the window, the undulating and diversified lands of Wisconsin seemed to be rushing swiftly past him. Then the occurrences of the day before flashed upon his mind, and feelings of mortification and regret welled up within him—mortification at the losses and the facility with which he had been duped, and regret at the readiness and ease with which he had yielded to temptation.

And when again his thoughts reverted to Violet and her mother, intense shame and

distress took complete possession of him ; for he realised how impossible it would be for him to write them the truth about this piece of folly and simplicity, and what a wretched return he had made for the confidence they had reposed in him. The idea that the money Mrs Carlisle had given him should have gone, through his weakness and fault, into the pocket of a false and thieving woman, galled him to the quick, and caused his heart to bow in humiliation and sorrow.

Then bitter and angry feelings succeeded these softer ones when he reflected on the harsh manner in which he had been driven forth into a strange world, in a state of such innocence and child-like simplicity that he was liable to become a prey to any sharpers who might pick him out. But he had learned a lesson—a severe, caustic, and expensive lesson—which would stand him in good stead hereafter.

Nothing of note occurred during the journey from Chicago to St Paul. No one bothered him in any way, and the few other passengers in the car showed no disposition to cultivate his acquaintance. At St Paul he had to wait several hours for the Northern Pacific train, and then once more he found himself *en route*.

It was night again, and the "sleeper" was brilliantly lighted.

So far, his solitude during the journey from the "Garden City" had been completely uninterrupted, and he was once more feeling a victim to that longing for companionship, which had rushed him into the disastrous acquaintance with Miss Minnie Sharp.

He had been standing for some little time out on the rear platform of the car, watching the receding lights of Minneapolis, through which town they had just passed, when he was joined by a stranger, who accosted him with,—

"Nice evening!"

"Yes, beautiful," was Arthur's answer.

"Going far?" queried the stranger.

"As far as Fargo."

"Come far?"

"All the way from England."

"I guessed as much. Dead sure you was English. Voice gave you away. Over on bisness?"

"Yes."

Arthur's recent experience had already had the effect of teaching him the necessity for reserve with strangers.

"What bisness?" continued the man,

quite unabashed by the terseness of the last reply.

“ Farming.”

The word came reluctantly from young Vallance’s lips. He was quite willing to talk with the man, but he resented this system of cross-examination.

“ Ain’t much in it now-a-days,” persisted his interrogator. “ Got much capital invested in it ?”

“ No.”

“ Giving it a trial before putting up money, eh ?”

“ Yes.”

“ That’s right. Friends with you ?”

“ No, I am alone.”

“ Slow work travelling alone, ain’t it ?”

“ Yes ; its not very cheerful.”

“ Makes you sort of hanker after a little company, eh ?”

“ Sometimes.”

“ Ever play cards ?”

“ Very little.”

“ Know poker ?”

“ No.”

“ Like to have a lesson ?”

“ No, thanks.”

“ You’ll have to learn if you’re going to live

in Dakota. A man as can't play poker round those parts ain't in it. Know any game?"

"No; I never played cards at home."

"Come in and sit down, and I'll show you a thing or two. There ain't no one in the smoking-room. Let's go in there."

At this moment a long arm extended from the car door, and a shining ticket punch tapped young Vallance's companion sharply on the shoulder, while a voice exclaimed in very gruff tones,—

"Say, ef ye try any of yer darned tricks on my train, I'll stop her, and put ye off, darned ef I doan't. Ye know me."

The man turned and found himself face to face with the conductor of the train, who had been standing, unobserved, in the doorway behind them.

"I wasn't going to do any tricks. You don't suppose I would play serious with this young man?"

"I know ye'd rob yer grandmother's corpse, ef ye got a chance. Ye can't ply yer dirty trade on my train. Ef ye produce a card out of yer pocket, ye'll spend the night a-footing it on the track. I'll put ye off anywhar, station or no station."

The man made no reply, but slunk back into

the car, and the conductor, stepping out on to the platform, looked at Arthur Vallance for a moment, and then remarked,—

“ Ye want to keep clear o’ that sort. He’s a bad un. He’s a bunco steerer, a three-card monté man, and a sort o’ general sneak thief. He ain’t got the pluck to tackle a decent crooked job, but he’d clean out a boy or a woman in no time. Doan’t ye ever go to play cards or bet with a stranger on a train. Ticket, please.”

Young Vallance produced the remains of the railway ticket he had bought in New York, and which, as coupon after coupon had been torn off by the conductors *en route*, had gradually diminished in size until only the stub and one coupon were left. These the conductor now pocketed. His doing so came as a welcome reminder that the last stage of this tedious journey had been reached ; and Arthur’s recent experiences raised a doubt in his mind as to whether it would be safe for him to relinquish possession of the bit of paper which showed his right to be carried by the railway company to Fargo, and he therefore asked,—

“ Do you keep my ticket ? Don’t I need it again ? ”

"No, not agin," was the reply. "My run is from St Paul to Fargo, and so I keep ye company, and will see ye through all right. Ef ye was going beyond Fargo ye'd need yer ticket for the next conductor, but ye ain't. Ye're English, ain't ye ?"

"Yes."

"Bin long in this country ?"

"Not three days yet, and I've been travelling all the time."

"I thought ye seemed a bit green, even for a young man like yerself. Ye'll need to keep yer eyes open in these parts. Going to stop in Fargo ?"

"No : I am going to a farm several miles from there."

"To friends o' yers, eh ?"

"No, not exactly ; he's a man who takes farm pupils."

"Know anything about him ?"

"Not much."

"I know most people round about Fargo. What's his name ?"

"John Emerson."

"Never heard tell of him. What's the name of his place ?"

"Square-Mile Farm."

"Never heard tell of it. Shouldn't be sur-

prised ef it turned out to be a squar' inch farm when ye git thar. Are ye paying much for the pupilling?"

"My uncle is paying a very fair price, I fancy."

"Wal, every man knows his own business best, but I've bin on this line ever since she opened, and I've carried a few o' ye English pupils up country, and I've carried some of 'em back; but, generally when I've carried 'em back, they've run away from the pupilling, and have begged me to help 'em to get to the towns. Many a lad I've carried free on my train from Fargo to St Paul."

"And do you think it is a swindle, then?"

"I dar'n't say that, because I doan't know; but I have come across young Englishmen who says they are mostly frauds. Anyway, some of the boys have been mighty pleased to get away. There are two or three lads working on the trains on this run as brakemen, who came out as farm pupils. They likes rail-roading better than farming,"

Arthur's heart sank within him at this intelligence, and, after a few more remarks, he related to the conductor his experience with Miss Minnie Sharp of Chicago, and the

manner in which that young lady had drugged and robbed him.

The gruff old railwayman eyed him curiously for a few minutes, but there was a mixture of amusement and sympathy in his look, which half irritated and half comforted the youth.

"You are almost inclined to laugh at me?" Arthur said.

"No; I ain't, not by a long shot," was the prompt response; "but it do seem pretty green—though, so far as that goes, it's a trick as has been played on many an older and wiser head than yers. It's a darned pity!"

"It certainly is a pity for me. It left me penniless, if it hadn't been for the good nature of the proprietor."

"Doan't go to talk to me about the good nature of that loafer! That's whar ye're sich a greeny. He could afford to give ye back twenty-five dollars out of the three hundred and fifty he and the gal got out of ye."

"He didn't get it."

"He got his shar. He and the gal was partners. It's a very old game. They gave ye back twenty-five to get ye out of the way and avoid a row. Maybe it's

as well ye took it. Ef ye'd cut up too rough, after talking about the Consul and the police, they might 'ave got rid of ye altogether, ye might 'ave grown into an unknown corpse in the river."

They talked together for some time, until the conductor was obliged to attend to his duties. As he took his departure, he gave Arthur a friendly tap on the shoulder, and said,—

"Ef ye find things doan't pan out well at Squar' Inch Farm, and ye need a lift back East agin, jest come into Fargo and ask at the hotel by the Northern Pacific Dêpot for Bill Macguire. That's me. I'll always take ye back to St Paul, and ye doan't need any ticket on my train. Every one in Fargo knows old Bill Macguire. I'm always thar every fourth day for twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER XI.

ARTHUR MAKES ANOTHER FRIEND.

It was eight o'clock in the morning when Arthur descended the steps of the sleeping car, and stood upon the platform of the Northern Pacific Railway Station at Fargo. The night had been hot and sultry—too much so to admit of any one sleeping comfortably in the atmospheric unpleasantries of Mr Pullman's hotels on wheels, and the young man emerged from the train, feeling heavy and depressed.

There was not much in the surrounding scene to cheer and encourage him, for the sun was already high in the sky, and was shining down with a fierce heat upon the unprotected and uninviting little town which stands by the border line of Minnesota and North Dakota, while the half-a-dozen dilapidated and peculiar vehicles which came lurching and swaying alongside the track,

raised clouds of dense black dust, and even the pedestrians, who had lounged to the dépôt to see the train arrive, enveloped themselves in a small haze of pulverised soil at every step they took.

Half-a-dozen runners for hotels at once described the young immigrant, and were instantly baying round him like so many wolves, but, in accordance with the advice of Bill Macguire, he declined the services of them all except the man from the hostelry facing the railway. To this establishment he had his portmanteau taken, and then, having breakfasted there, devoted his attention to obtaining information as to the distance and direction of Square Mile Farm, and the means of reaching it.

All inquiries at the hotel were fruitless, but the landlord recommended him to ask at the Post Office.

“ Say as I sent you, and as you’re stopping here, and they’ll find it out for you if there is such a place,” he said ; “ and if they can’t find out there, there is a carrier as might know.”

So Arthur hied himself off through the heat and dust to the Post Office ; and as soon as he had mentioned the name of his hotel,

the post-mistress put forth her best endeavours to give him the information he required.

"Yes," she said, after referring to two or three books, a map, and a couple of clerks; "there is a place o' that name, and a man o' the name o' Emerson who lives on it, about forty miles to the south-west o' here. The mail goes out from here twice a-week, but it don't go within twelve or fifteen miles of Square Mile Farm. It seems as if those people at Square Mile Farm had tried to get the most isolated spot they could. Other places a hundred miles north, west, or south-west of here are not so difficult to get at."

"Can you advise me how to get out there?" he asked, in perplexity.

"Do they expect you?" she inquired, looking at him with some interest.

"Yes; but they don't know exactly when to expect me."

"You can hire a buggy, I think. It's a fairish long drive, but it's dead flat all the way. There ain't a hill as big as your foot between here and there. If they expect you, they ought to come and fetch you."

“ Could I telegraph there ? ”

The post-mistress shook her head.

“ No wires,” she said, laconically.

“ If I wrote to-day, when would they get it, do you think ? ”

“ The mail went yesterday ; none again till the day after to-morrow, and then it’s uncertain when any one from Square Mile Farm might call for letters.”

Arthur thanked the post-mistress for her attention, and returned to the hotel.

Here the first person he met was the conductor, Bill Maguire, who, divested of coat and waistcoat, was sitting on the piazza smoking a cigar.

“ Wal,” said the railwayman, tilting his chair far back on its hind legs, “ I see ye still about. Have ye got wind of Squar’ Inch Farm yet ? ”

“ Yes,” was the reply ; “ it’s forty miles to the south-west of here. I have found that out, but I haven’t found out how I am going to get there.”

“ Ain’t it near to any place ? ”

“ It’s fifteen miles from a village called Elton, but the postmistress said there wasn’t more than four houses in the village.”

Mr Maguire allowed his chair to resume its

normal position on four legs ; then he slowly rose from it, and, inviting Arthur to follow him, crossed the railway, and entered a machine, hardware and general store, which stood on the other side of the tracks.

“ Morning, Jim,” he said, shaking the hand of a man who came forward to meet him.

“ Morning, Bill,” returned the other, eyeing young Vallance, and wondering if he were a customer.

“ Jim,” continued Mr Maguire, “ do ye know any one who lives out Elton ways—any one in town going out in that direction who could give my friend here a lift to Squar’ Mile Farm ?”

“ Why, yes,” responded the other ; “ there’s a man who bought a new plough from me last evening. He comes from beyond Elton, and is going to start back this morning. I guess he’ll have room in his wagon ; he ain’t loaded very heavy,—only a new plough, a barrel o’ molasses, a demijohn o’ Bourbon whisky, a keg o’ kerosene, a few sacks o’ flour, and a bundle o’ groceries.”

“ That’ll do, if he will carry him. Wagon pretty roomy ?”

“ About the usual size of a light wagon.

There'll be plenty o' room for your friend a-top o' the load. English, ain't he?"

"Yes; just come over."

Then turning to Arthur, who had remained silent during this brief conversation, Mr Maguire said,—

"Mr Vallance, let me make you acquainted with Mr Jim Rice."

The general store-keeper and the English lad shook hands.

"Glad to know ye," said the former; "I hope, when ye need anything in my line, ye'll give me a look in."

"Thank you," replied Arthur; "I will."

Then remembering the scanty sum which now constituted his sole wealth, he asked,—

"Will it be expensive getting out to Square Mile Farm?"

"I guess not," answered Mr Rice. "Sam will take ye for nothing, I reckon, and be glad o' yer company. He'll do anything to favour me, and I'll do anything for my friend Bill Maguire, so there ain't any occasion to talk about payment. He'll carry ye to Elton, and put ye in the way o' getting on to Square Mile Farm. Going to settle out there?"

"Not to settle. I may remain there for

a time. Do ye know the people there at all?"

"No, I don't; but I kind of recollect selling some goods to go out there once. English family, I reckon?"

"I don't know; probably it is. I am only going as a pupil."

"I reckon ye won't grow grey there, then. But come back and take a little something to keep the heat out. Ye'll have a powerful hot drive."

The three passed through a vast bazaar of agricultural implements, cutlery, hardware, groceries; and entered a small room at the rear of it. Here Mr Jim Rice produced all the paraphernalia of an ordinary bar-room, and at once proceeded to dispense iced spirituous refreshments to his two friends and himself; and they remained there, drinking and conversing, until an employé in the store disturbed them by announcing that Mr Sam Hicks had come for his plough.

The storekeeper immediately went to the door and had a short talk with Mr Hicks, finally bringing that gentleman also into the little room at the rear. Introductions came next, followed by another iced drink all

round, and then it had been decided that Arthur Vallance was to be the guest of Sam Hicks in the latter's wagon.

The vehicle was already so well filled that its owner was compelled to sit upon a barrel of molasses; but for Arthur he soon improvised a seat out of two sacks of flour—one to be occupied as a cushion, and the other used as a support for the youth's back. These arrangements being completed satisfactorily, Mr Hicks and young Vallance drove across the railway to the hotel, procured the latter's luggage, and, having made it secure in the rear of the wagon, started on their journey.

The free-and-easy good fellowship which appeared to exist between these rough and ready Westerners came as a pleasant revelation to the young Englishman, for there were a bluff good nature and a genial kindness of feeling towards each other, which not only pleased him, but even seemed to engraft themselves in his own heart, and to make him feel more at peace with the world in general. He began to realise that he was now, at all events, learning something of the world, and that even these coarse, uncultured citizens of the Far West could teach him many things.

Sam Hicks was not a man whose best friend would have asserted that he had any pretensions to culture or polish, or that his vocabulary was not of a very low order ; but, in his way, he was a jovial companion, and the two had not proceeded far on their journey, before Arthur came to the conclusion that Mr Hicks was really an excellent fellow, and, therefore, the long drive under a broiling sun, over perfectly level prairie land, did not turn out so tedious and irksome as it might have done, and, during its progress, Sam Hicks gave Arthur many a valuable wrinkle in regard to life in Dakota.

"Ye're what we call a 'greenhorn,'" he said to him, after the youth had asked some simple question ; "but ef ye keeps yer eyes open, and have got plenty of grit in ye, ye'll get along like a house afire. It ain't no use for ye to set up to be smart now, because every one can see as ye're green as young corn. Ye've got a deal to larn, but ye'll larn it fast enough."

"It seems to me," Arther replied, "that I am learning already, but, so far, I have paid pretty dear for my lessons."

"We all has to pay for lessons," was the sententious answer, "but they gets cheaper as

we go along. What lesson has been emptying yer pocket?"

Arthur told him about his experience in Chicago with Miss Minnie Sharp, and, to his astonishment, the man burst out into such a roar of laughter, that he nearly fell forward off his keg of molasses on to the backs of his pair of mules.

"Darn my soul," he cried, as soon as he had recovered himself, "ef that doan't beat creation. Why, jest three years ago the very same game was played on me, and darned ef I warn't quite cleaned out."

"What, you?"

"Yes, me; it was this way: I had been down to Chicagy with a lot o' cattle, and when I had sold 'em, and got the money in my pocket, I went out to see the town. I seed it, and no mistake. I remember a beautiful little gal dressed as I never seed any gal dressed, except in a picture, and when she seed me admiring her with all my eyes, she smiled sich a sweet friendly smile, that I spoke to the little angel at once. Then we got quite intimate like, and she asked me what I was doing, and whar I come from. Then, darned fool, I told her I had come down to sell cattle, and had sold 'em, and got the

money. Then the daisy, little duck, says she must go home to dinner, as she was getting very hungry."

Here Mr Hicks once more became so amused at his own expressions, that he broke out into another explosion of laughter, and laughed until his eyes filled with water. As soon as he had recovered, he continued,—

"I says, 'I am sorry for that, as I had hoped to have seen ye longer. Why not dine with me? I am sure I can give ye as good a dinner as ye'll get at home, swell as ye may be.' The little chicken said, with sich a 'witching smile, 'It's very naughty, but I'll do it, ef ye'll come to a quiet little restaurong whar no one will see me.' I says, 'I'll go anywhar with ye ye like.' So she says, 'Come along,' and she puts her pretty little hand inside my arm and we went off together."

Mr Hicks paused for a moment, and took a drink out of a big flat bottle which he kept in a corner of the wagon. Then he continued,—

"She was a thirsty little chicken, she was. Three times before we pulled up at that little restaurong she wanted a drink to help our appetites. Ef drinking helps appetites, our

appetites ought to have taken the restaurong. When we got to that restaurong it was some time afore I could strike the door—it seemed so small. Anyhow, we got in, and went into a small room all by ourselves. There we ate and drank, and later I fell asleep. When I woke up it was dark, and my head felt as big as a prize water-melon—it was just busting. I raised sich a row in that dark room, that the boss of the restaurong came tearing in like a mad bull."

"Was he a big, stout man?" asked Arthur, eagerly.

"Fairish big," answered Mr Hicks, and then he added: "As soon as I had got accustomed to the dazzle of the light, I says, 'Whar's the gal?' and he answers, very sharp, 'I don't know whar she is; got tired and gone, I guess. A drunken man asleep ain't the most cheerful company.' I puts my hand back to my pistol-pocket and says, 'I ain't bin drunk, ye loafer,' and then my hand finds out that my 'shooting-iron' is gone—it ain't thar. Next minute I have larned that my money for the cattle is gone too—the gal had taken 'shooter,' money, and all. It was a devil of a go!"

"And did you never try to get it back?"

"Oh, didn't I!" was the reply. "I

tumbled at once that the boss was a pard of the gal's, and so I bemoaned my loss very meekly, for my 'shooter' was gone ye see, and ef he had said, 'Hold up yer hands,' I should have had to put 'em up. So I made out to be much drunker than I ever had bin, and presently staggered out, pretending not to know whar I was. The boss was satisfied, and sure that he would never see me agin."

"And did he?"

"Bet yer life he did? Jest as soon as I got round the corner, I made off to my hotel like lightning. It was wonderful how the loss o' that ere money had cleared my head. I was sober as a judge on the bench in the morning. Thar was six other boys from Dakota stopping at that hotel, and some of 'em had already gone to bed, but when I tells 'em what's happened to me, they all gits up and comes back with me to the restaurong. I had marked the place well. Afore we started one of 'em lent me an extra 'shooter' he had with him. When we gets to the restaurong the boss is back in his private office, and we all goes straight for it. I kep a little behind the other boys at first, so he shouldn't reckernise me, until we had got the drop on him.

"Then they walks in quite quietly, and

the two in front jerks out their ‘shooting irons,’ and pointing them at the boss’s head, says, ‘Good evening ; hands up !’ He held up his hands above his head as meek as a new-born child, and then I comes up, and feels in his pocket for his ‘shooter,’ and puts it in my own pocket, and then says, ‘Now, ye give me back that nine hundred dollars that gal and ye stole from me, or we’ll hang ye to yer own lamp over yer front door—darned ef we doan’t !’ Young man, that loafer paid out the nine hundred dollars without a kick, he paid out for a new shooter for me, and he opened six bottles of champagne afore we left. That’s the story of how the little gal in Chicagy robbed Sam Hicks.”

“But,” said Arthur, “you had no proof that he was really her confederate.”

“Thar was proof enough to suit us. And, anyhow, I was robbed in his place, and that was sufficient reason for making him shell out. We boys don’t stand no shuffling o’ that kind. He was mixed up in a crooked deal, and he had to settle.”

“But suppose he really was innocent ?”

“Thar warn’t no innercence about him, I tell ye. He took it all kindly enuff, and

was smart enuff' to see that he had treed the wrong coon for once."

"And suppose he had refused to pay it back, or had called for assistance?"

"Thar warn't no 'sistance could ever have reached him. We was seven o' the tuffest boys in Dakota, we was, and ef he had opened his mouth wide enuff' to holler, bullets would have gone down his throat like corn down a turkey's. He knowed his men as soon as he seed us, and it was a blessed good thing for him as he did."

"And do you think that it was the same place I was robbed in?"

"Can't say about that. I darsay thar's many a den o' the same kind."

"But I met the girl on the train. She was coming from New York."

"That doan't count for nothing. Ye finds them everywhar. When they're flush they travels about like queens. She'd probably bin on a holiday after making a big haul, and jest picked ye up accidentally on her way home. They've allays got their hands in for business, and the sleeping-cars ain't the worst hunting grounds, by a long shot."

They drove along in silence for a few minutes, until they came to a cluster of

small trees. Under the shade of these Mr Hicks pulled up, and told his companion to alight. Then he descended, and having watered and fed his mules, produced a dilapidated old basket out of the wagon, and invited Arthur to have some dinner.

The repast was not a banquet, but young Vallance enjoyed it as much as he had ever enjoyed a dinner at his uncle's. For the first time in his life he tasted lager beer, and found it a cooling and refreshing drink after a long hot drive, and when he had sufficiently slaked his thirst, he found himself tearing a cold fried spring chicken to pieces with his fingers, and gnawing the meat off the bones. Mr Hicks evidently enjoyed a good feed as well as any epicure, but, in his estimation, knives and forks and plates were quite superfluous on an expedition like this. After they had both devoured as much chicken, boiled green corn, and raw tomatoes, as they could manage, and had washed them down with copious draughts of lager beer, the two travellers resumed their journey.

One thing, small in itself, now troubled Arthur. He felt perplexed as to whether it would be proper to offer his new friend

payment for this meal. It had been so good, and he had eaten so much, that he was convinced in his own mind Mr Hicks could not afford to give it to him gratis.

Certainly there was nothing in Sam Hicks's appearance to indicate any ability to indulge in generosity. His entire dress consisted of five articles—a huge Panama hat, many seasons old ; a big red flannel shirt, which, owing to a scarcity of buttons, hung open at the neck and chest ; a pair of rough buck-skin breeches, supported by a greasy cow-hide belt, from which hung a leather case containing his "shooter," the muzzle end of this receptacle being tucked into the hip pocket of the breeches ; a pair of boots reaching to his knees, which, from their exceedingly rusty look, might be presumed not to have made the acquaintance of blacking for months past, if ever.

After a covert inspection of his companion's attire, young Vallance made a timid suggestion that he was indebted to him for such an excellent dinner.

"Want to pay for it, do ye?" inquired Mr Hicks. "Think I keep an eating saloon out on the prairie, eh? Wal, I respect ye

for thinking o' it, but thar ain't anything owing atween us. Ye're a friend o' my friend's friend, and that's enuff for me. We're a roughish lot out here, some says, but we doan't charge each other for a bit o' bread and meat, not by a darned sight, we doan't."

There was something in the speaker's tones that told the young Englishman he was in earnest, and that it would be as well to drop the subject at once, but, in spite of that, he could not refrain from expressing his gratitude, and saying,—

"At all events, it's very kind of you, and I feel as if I were taking too much advantage of a generous disposition."

"Let it drop ; let it drop," was the reply ; "thar ain't nothing to talk about in it. Ef ye hadn't eaten that chicken it might 'a bin left thar for the wolves ; it was getting almighty dry from want of eating."

Arthur knew well that this was not the case, and that the bird must have been both recently killed and cooked, but he said no more about it.

Then a desire to canvass this original character's opinion on the subject of eternal punishment suddenly rose within him. In-

deed, so much of his life had been spent in listening to, and moodily pondering over his stern relative's harangues on that subject, that now he could not converse with a stranger for a few minutes without being inspired with a wish to draw that stranger's ideas of the doctrines held by the man by whom he himself had been brought up. In a crude manner, he was really seeking for guidance for his mind, and for good grounds for totally rejecting the harsh teachings which had become a species of horror to him, and which, even at this long distance from their author, and under the great change of scene which he was experiencing, still occasionally oppressed him.

Nature, and his own instinct, told him that he had been mistaught, and that these teachings were a cruel misinterpretation of the truth, but he could not resist a longing to hear from other people words and opinions to uphold his own theories.

"What is your opinion of Hell?" he blurted out suddenly to his companion, who, for a moment, seemed quite taken aback by the question, and the abrupt change in the conversation.

"O' what?" asked Mr Hicks, drawing

himself bolt upright on his keg of molasses, and turning to look at Arthur.

"Of Hell; that is—eternal punishment."

"Wal," was the reply pronounced in a slow drawl, as though the speaker were not quite convinced as to the soundness of his words, "them's subjects as doan't bother us boys much. We leaves 'em to the ministers, who have more time to think about 'em, and get paid for talking about 'em."

"But," said Arthur, "you must have some idea on the subject? You must know whether you believe all the clergy teach?"

"Thar ain't no man as can believe all they teach, because most of 'em teach different. Now, in that little town we left this morning, thar's a dozen different ministers preaching different beliefs all the time, and each one of 'em ready to swar as all the others are dead wrong. A hard-working man like me ain't got no time to spend in trying to settle the matter for 'em. Besides, they're too far away for us country fellows."

"Aren't there any nearer?"

"Not a one, and I never heard as any was wanted."

"Then you are not a very firm believer in Hell?"

"Wal, ye know, its a word as the boys hereabouts use a good deal, but beyond that, it doan't amount to a row of pins. I know as some of the ministers teach that Hell is a penitentiary whar all the bad uns go after death, and whar thar ain't no pardons or completion of terms ; but it ain't never struck me to put much faith in it. We tries to do our duty to each other, we country boys, and we does our best for our wives and little uns, and it ain't often we refuse to help a fellow-man as is in trouble ; and when any man goes back on us or injures any o' us, sich as stealing our horses or assaulting our women folk, or the like, we all act as one man in getting even with him and having vingeance. We does our duty towards our fellow-man, and we helps one another all we can, but when our fellow-man does us a wrong we does our duty to him in another way. That's about all the relighun ye'll find out our ways, and, so far as I can see, it pans out jist as well as the multitude of relighuns in the towns."

"And what about the future ? "

"Wal, we believe as a man who does his duty here, and helps his friends, and doan't do anyone a wrong, is all right for the future. Them's my sentiments."

"And very good ones too. There is a satisfaction in a belief like that, but there's no satisfaction in believing, as I was always taught, that, do what I would, I was doomed for all eternity."

"Ef any one tried to frighten my young uns with any sich talk as that, he'd be given twenty-four hours to leave the country. The boys wouldn't stand none o' that. A man would do more good keeping his mouth shut than spouting them ideas."

And then the subject was dropped, and Arthur congratulated himself on having obtained so valuable an opinion as that of his new friend.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when Mr Hicks's vehicle, with its owner and Arthur upon it, rolled into a little settlement of four frame houses, and pulled up in front of one of them, which, as a matter of course, was a liquor saloon. They had arrived at Elton. The two or three men hanging round the entrance greeted Sam Hicks with a cheery welcome, and both he and the young Englishman were at once invited to "come in and have a drink."

Arthur had already been apprised by Mr Hicks that this was the point at which they

must part, for their journeys after this lay in almost opposite directions. The Westerner, however, had undertaken to see that a conveyance was forthcoming at Elton to take the young Britisher on to Square Mile Farm, and it was plainly apparent that he meant to be as good as his word, for no sooner had he descended from his wagon than he was negotiating for the use of a buggy—the only vehicle in Elton—with one of the men who had welcomed him.

CHAPTER XII.

SQUARE MILE FARM.

ARTHUR VALLANCE and Sam Hicks parted on very friendly terms, shaking hands in a most cordial manner.

"Come over some day and see me," said the Westerner, just before he scrambled into the wagon to continue his journey. "Ye'll always find a hearty welcome, plenty to eat and drink, and a corner to sleep for a night or two. My shanty lies due south-west from hyar, and any of the lads hyarabouts will put ye in the way of getting at Sam Hicks's. It ain't more than thirty miles from whar ye're going."

"I'll come, certainly, with pleasure," replied the young Englishman; "and I shall always remember your kindness."

"Thar ain't no kindness to speak of, and thar ain't nothing owing atween us. Any time as ye needs a friend or a bit of advice, jist make yer way to Sam Hicks's. My shanty

and its bit o' land ain't got no sich name as Squar' Mile Farm to tickle the ears with, but it's as good as most of the shanties hyarabouts. It's only known as Sam Hicks's."

And then he had spoken to his two old mules, and his rickety wagon had jogged away across the prairie.

The man who had agreed to drive Arthur on to Square Mile Farm had meanwhile been busy in harnessing a very ancient looking grey horse to a still more ancient looking buggy, and having succeeded in stowing the youth's portmanteau under the seat, now beckoned to him to signify that all was ready.

It had been agreed by Mr Hicks that young Vallance should pay only the very moderate price of four dollars for horse, man, and buggy, but even this comparatively small payment reduced his capital to three dollars, for in spite of all the economy he had practised, the twenty-five dollars given to him by the proprietor of the restaurant in which he had been robbed, had gradually dribbled away, bit by bit ; and, consequently, on his arrival at his destination, five thousand miles from home, his entire stock of money consisted of three dollars.

This is about the sum which, when they

first commenced life, tradition generally places to the credit of those millionaires who have risen from the ranks of labour ; but that from this trifling amount to great affluence is a terribly steep ascent, is amply proved by the fact that, out of the tens of millions of people ever trying to climb it, history only records the success of a very few dozens.

The sun was just dipping beneath the horizon, casting a rosy tint over the endless plain of waving herbage, which undulated gently to and fro in the warm southerly breeze, when Arthur's companion pointed to a long, low, wooden structure, which looked like a barn, and told him that that was Square Mile Farm House. The youthful immigrant eyed it intently and with curiosity, the result being a feeling of disappointment. It was not like any of those picturesque, white frame dwellings, with their green outside blinds and their pretty piazzas covered with flowers and creepers, which he had admired so much while passing through Wisconsin and Minnesota ; but it was merely a long, low shed, of forbidding and unsightly appearance, with small, narrow windows and an almost flat roof. There was no garden or lawn surrounding it, no trees or bushes, no-

thing but a high, bare, board fence. It stood out bleak and dreary in its ugliness, naked in the very midst of the vast prairie.

As the buggy skirted round the palisades in search of the door, they met a tall, rough-looking individual, who told them to go round to the other side. Here they discovered the main entrance opening into a cattle yard.

The man whom they had met followed them, and, extending his hand to Arthur, said,—

“Arthur Vallance, I presume.”

“Yes,” was the reply. “I am Arthur Vallance.”

Then the rough-looking individual opened the house-door and called in deep bass tones, “Sal.”

A shrill voice responded from some part of the interior, and immediately after, a tall, lank, middle-aged woman, with sharp features and little cold grey eyes, made her appearance, and framed her gaunt bony figure in the doorway.

“Here’s young Vallance, Sal,” said the man who had summoned her.

Then, turning to Arthur, he added, by way of introduction,—

“This is my wife, Mrs Emerson. I am

John Emerson. How did you get out from Fargo? In this thing?"

"Oh, no," was Arthur's reply, "I came out as far as Elton with a Mr Sam Hicks."

"Well, get your luggage down."

Young Vallance was a little surprised at being told in this unceremonious manner to lift down his own portmanteau. He had not expected to find footmen in livery to wait upon him, it is true, but he had anticipated a slightly more civil reception than he was receiving. Another thing that also rather astonished him was, that he perceived at once that both Mr Emerson and his wife were of the same nationality as himself. He had pictured to himself a Westerner of the type of Sam Hicks, but a little more cultured; and instead of this he found a great, big, burly, vulgar Briton. Fond as he was of his country and countrymen, he would infinitely have preferred a genuine native of the West to this emigrant from his own land. Mr Emerson's voice, appearance, and manner created an unfavourable impression on him, and repelled him.

He lifted his portmanteau and "Gladstone" down from the buggy and placed them on the ground near the door. Then he paid

the man who had driven him over from Elton, and watched him take his departure with a feeling very akin to regret. So weary of travelling had he become that he had hailed the sight of this unprepossessing establishment with gladness, but now, before he had even entered the door, he was wishing that he could return in the buggy which had brought him.

"Now, come on," said Mr Emerson, interrupting him in his brief reverie. "I'll show you where to put your things."

Young Vallance picked up his "Gladstone" and followed his host, who, after entering the house, turned sharply to the left, passed through a narrow doorway, and stood in a long low shed.

"Here you are," said the teacher of farm pupils, waving his right hand majestically towards the other end of the room, "here's where my young men sleep. It isn't equal to a room in a country house at home, but it is as good as any one gets in this part of the world. That's your bed at the far end."

Arthur's eyes roamed all over the apartment; along the walls, which were mere rough planks; up at the roof, which was plain wooden shingles; down on the floor, which

was of the coarsest boards. In England the chamber itself would not have been considered a good enough habitation for a decent carriage horse. Then he glanced at the furniture, and took a mental inventory of it. All he could see was an old iron stove, rusty and dark now, but probably used in winter; seven wide plank benches, covered with dirty straw mattresses and horse-cloths, projecting at regular intervals from the inner wall; and a dirty table with two big tin basins and a tin bucket standing upon it. He surmised immediately that the wide benches were intended for, and used as beds, and that the table, basins, and bucket constituted the washing apparatus. By the sides of some of the beds stood trunks or portmanteaux, evidently the property of the pupils, and over two of them hung small hand-glasses, also obviously private property. There was absolutely no other article of furniture in the room, and more comfortless and repulsive quarters Arthur felt confident he could never have imagined. He turned curtly to Mr Emerson and asked,—

“Do you mean I am to sleep in here?”

“Certainly; it’s good enough for all the others,” replied the professor of farming.
“Do you expect Turkish carpets and feather

beds out here? If you do, you won't get them."

"I don't," retorted the youth, hotly; "but my uncle wouldn't house his own horses in a place like this. I have never been accustomed to such accommodation."

"You'll soon get accustomed to it. After a few days' work out-of-doors you'll be willing to sleep on a stone floor, to say nothing of a straw mattress. The place is comfortable enough for anyone."

"How many others sleep here?"

"Six; they are all young fellows like yourself."

"It's disgusting to put seven fellows in a shed like this. I certainly will not stay here."

"Well, get you portmanteau in now, and we'll talk about it another time."

"Some one must help me."

Mr Emerson bawled out "Gabe" in a voice that rang through the building, and in a moment an enormous black negro, about six feet six inches in height, appeared before him.

"Help this young man with his luggage, Gabe."

"Yas, boss."

The negro approached the portmanteau,

stood it on its end, and then picking it up, slung it over his shoulder, and carrying it into the room, deposited it by the bed at the extreme end of the row. Then he departed as quickly and silently as he had come.

"Is that the manservant?" asked Arthur.

"That is my cook," replied Mr Emerson. "Everyone here is his own servant, but that coloured man cooks for us all. My pupils do everything for themselves except cook."

"It must be a profitable business taking farm pupils," returned young Vallance, sarcastically. "I don't wonder that the papers are full of advertisements inviting parents and guardians to send their superfluous children out to this country as farm pupils."

"Well, it isn't likely a man is going to be bothered with them for nothing. They're an awful nuisance, really."

"What do we all do?"

"Who?"

"We pupils."

"Do; why, what the devil do you think you do? You work on the farm, of course! Do you think you walk about the prairie in a shiny hat and patent leathers?"

"No, I don't; but I want to know what sort of work we do?"

"You do the usual work that is done on a farm of this kind. You go through the whole business — it's the only way to learn."

"What do you mean by the whole business?"

"Everything that is done on a farm, from ploughing and digging, to reaping, tending cattle, and so on."

"Do you expect me to plough and dig?"

"I do."

"And do you pay me for doing it?"

"Certainly not. Your services are really worth very little, but what they are worth comes to me as compensation for teaching you. Don't let's have any more nonsense. You'll see what the others have to do, and you'll do the same. You are at liberty to leave any moment your guardian decides to take you away, but as long as you are here you will live and work with the others."

The man spoke in a bullying tone, and Arthur instinctively realised that already they were on the verge of war—that as soon as their acquaintance had ripened a bit, open enmity would exist between them. Naturally, he felt downcast and depressed, but there was also asserting itself within him a spirit of

independence, bred of resentment and injustice, that bid fair to stand him in good stead.

He was no coward, but, on the contrary, was possessed of plenty of true British pluck ; the only trouble being that, in his youth, so much oppression and snubbing had been his lot, that he was slow to recognise the point at which it was necessary to make a stand. When, however, he should at last do so, and his patience and endurance finally become exhausted, it was probable that, so far as spirit and resolution were concerned, he would give a very good account of himself.

At nine o'clock half-a-dozen lads and a man who bore a striking resemblance to Mr Emerson, came in from work to supper. Arthur soon ascertained that the latter was a brother of the "boss."

They all sat down at a clothless table, composed of rough planks rudely knocked together, and commenced to devour the food which the gaunt Mrs Emerson, who sat at one end of the table, dealt out to them. The fare was very simple, and far from tempting ; it consisted of two courses, the first being stale corn bread and cold pork ; the second, stale corn bread and molasses.

After supper, the two brothers and Mrs Emerson retired to a room which they reserved for their private use, and left their pupils to do as they pleased until bed-time. As all of the rooms in the house were merely divided from each other by partitions of planks, the actual privacy which either party experienced was not excessive.

It was not an animated company in which Arthur Vallance found himself, and none of his new acquaintances seemed endowed with a high flow of spirits. There were two brothers, named Harry and Fred Summers, of sixteen and fifteen respectively, who looked jaded and worn, as though suffering from overwork; there was a lad of about Arthur's age who seemed to have lost all interest in the world, and who ate little and spoke not at all. He was known to the others as Hughes. There were two cousins who appeared tired and dejected, and who carried on a low conversation together about the new-comer; and there was a burly-looking youth of eighteen who was a picture of health and strength, but in whose face also were traceable the lines of dissatisfaction. On the whole, it was a hopeless-looking group of English boys, such as is fortunately a rare spectacle, and not a single member of it ap-

peared to have an interest in anything whatever.

Young Vallance, who was sitting next to Fred Summers, asked his neighbour,—

“What sort of a life do you lead here?”

“Drudgery—simple drudgery,” was the brief reply.

“Does he expect us to do so much work, then?”

“Expect us!” interposed the elder Summers. “We are simply unpaid labourers; we are as badly off as the niggers in Virginia or Carolina used to be.”

“But why,” asked Arthur, “do you stand it? Do your people know how it is?”

“Yes, I have written home all about it, and I got the letter posted in spite of Emerson and his lynx-eyed wife; but it was through our step-mother that my father sent us out here, and she’ll never let us come home again. She is feathering the nest for her own two brats. She’s got us here, and here she means to keep us.”

“I should have run away long ago if I had been able,” said the younger brother, “but the fact is we are over forty miles from the railway, and neither of us has a shilling. The young Mrs Summers has carefully provided

against such a contingency by keeping us penniless. We should starve if we tried to get away."

"And doesn't your father pay any attention to your letters?"

"No. I doubt if he ever gets them. I expect our step-mother steals them. She would do anything. That fellow at the end of the table—Hughes is his name—was sent here through a step-mother, too. This place is a prison for boys with step-mothers or relatives who don't want them."

"And the others?" asked Arthur.

"Pretty much the same reasons for being here. Their people wanted to get rid of them for some cause or other. There was one fellow here who only stayed a month. He wrote home, and his father wrote by return to some friends in New York to come here and take him away. Two men came, and they gave old Emerson a talking to I'll bet he hasn't forgotten."

"Emerson's an Englishman?"

"Yes; and, although he's a coarse brute, he has had some education, and so has his brother. 'Sal' is a Tartar!"

"His wife?"

"Yes; she's the worst of the lot. She's

always prowling about, spying on us, and trying to overhear what we talk about. If two of us are together in the shed they call a stable, rubbing the horses or mules down, it's ten to one she's hiding in an adjoining stall to try and hear what we say to each other."

"Do you mean that you rub the horses down yourselves?"

"Why, of course we do. There's no one else to do it. That nigger is the only hired man on the place, and he only cooks and does things for 'Sal.' He tells everything he sees, too. But rubbing horses down isn't the worst job we have to do. There are plenty far more disagreeable than that."

"How big is the farm—a square mile?"

"No, not half; about three hundred acres, or rather less. They call it Square Mile Farm because it is rather over a third of that much. What he actually owns is about two hundred and eighty acres, but there's a great tract of open prairie all around us where we graze the cattle. The two hundred and eighty acres he cultivates so far as he is able to with our labour."

"But who owns the prairie where he grazes the cattle?"

"Government most, I think. A railway company some. It will all be occupied in a few years to come, but he gets the benefit of part of it at present. During the summer and early autumn his cattle may be said to be boarded free."

"Well, with free labour all the year round, and free board for his cattle during the summer, he ought to make it pay."

"Instead of free labour you should have said 'white slavery,' which pays for the privilege of being driven like niggers. We are slaves, and our people pay this man for letting us work for him. Thousands of farmers—respectable farmers—would pay us for our work, and be glad to get us."

"Then why not go to them?"

"First, because it requires ways and means to find them; and secondly, because our aspirations look to something better than farm labouring. D—— Emerson! There'll be a mutiny here some day, and I shall be a ring-leader."

"I have got a revolver," said Arthur, in an innocent, comical manner, that drew a smile from the weary faces of the two brothers; "but I've never fired it yet."

"Keep it hidden," whispered the elder

Summers, earnestly ; “if he knows you have got it he’ll take it away. He doesn’t allow any of us to carry firearms, except when we go far out on the prairie, and then he always takes them away when we return.”

“Surely we seven would be a match for him ?”

“Three of us would not be a match for him evenhanded — both he and his brother are ‘bruisers.’ It would take the whole seven of us to overpower him and his brother if they were unarmed, to say nothing of ‘Sal’ and the nigger. That darky can hit as hard as a mule can kick, and his head is as hard as a foundation-stone, and as for ‘Sal,’ her claws would bark an oak in no time.”

“Besides,” said the other brother, “allowing that we succeeded in overpowering the entire lot, what would be gained by it? We should be no better off in the end ; we couldn’t get away any sooner, unless we became tramps and begged our way homewards. There’s nothing for it but to submit quietly at present.”

Arthur acquiesced in this statement, and was compelled to admit that it was sound logic. Still, there was a rebellious spirit raging within him, and the uncivil reception

with which he had met on his arrival had angered and incensed him to such an extent that he would have been almost willing, then and there, to put himself at the head of a mutinous movement.

After some further conversation had passed, the master of the house appeared and coldly informed the boys that it was bed time. At once the lad nearest the lamp took it up and proceeded to the shed which officiated as a dormitory, the others immediately rising and following like so many sheep.

In a few minutes all the farm pupils had turned into their hard and comfortless beds, the light had been extinguished, and young Vallance was lying still and silent, concocting the letters to his uncle and Violet which he had determined to write the next morning.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHITE SLAVERY.

IN spite of the hardness of his bed, the absence of a pillow, and the coarseness of the blanket which did duty for all bed-clothing, young Vallance was soon buried in profound slumber, and did not awaken until disturbed by a noise that sounded as if a dozen carpenters were hammering around him. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and gazed about the room, unable for a moment to ascertain the cause of so much din.

The dawn was then only breaking, and streaks of grey daylight were stealing in through the narrow windows, just enabling the youth to distinguish the row of beds with their occupants wearily emerging from them, and in the centre of the room, on the opposite side, the figure of a man pounding with a stick on the plank wall. The row made by the pounding was intended as a summons to

the day's work, and this primitive method of calling the sleepers was a substitute for bells, gongs, or bugles. Noise, in this case, was all that was necessary, and in creating it with his short thick stick against the wooden wall, the burly negro, Gabe, was eminently successful.

In a few minutes the dormitory was empty and the pupils were collected together in the yard, awaiting directions for the day's toil. They were speedily joined by the two Emersons, the younger of whom always acted as an overseer, or, as Fred Summers termed it, as a "prison guard." It being harvest time, all hands were told off to the wheat field, two of the lads being ordered to harness a couple of horses and take them to the reaping machine. This latter article being rather an expensive investment, and of somewhat complicated a nature, Mr Emerson, senior, always drove it himself. The watering and feeding of the stock, and all other duties about the enclosure, were left to be attended to by "Sal" and Gabe, it being necessary that the force harvesting should be as strong as possible.

The first work which Arthur Vallance performed as a farm pupil was binding and

stacking sheaves of wheat, and long before "Sal" blew a whistle at the house, to indicate that breakfast was ready, his unpractised back was aching from the continual bending and stooping. After breakfast, which consisted of a nauseous decoction of coffee, smoked bacon, corn bread and potatoes, Arthur and the younger Summers were ordered to take two horses and pasture the cattle on the prairie for a couple of hours, and at the expiration of that time to bring them back to the enclosure, and to return to their work in the harvest field. Trotting and walking his steed about the prairie in company with Fred Summers, with nothing to do but to keep the herd together, came as a pleasant recreation after the wearisome task of binding and stacking wheat-sheaves. Not being by any means an expert rider, he was able to wile away the time in a profitable manner by taking lessons in the equestrian art from his companion, who was as proficient in it as a Sioux Indian. At the expiration of the two hours they "rounded up" the stock and drove them back into the enclosure.

"We shall have to take them out again late this afternoon," said Fred to Arthur as they were riding home; "two hours, twice a

day, is their allowance of pasture just during the busy part of the harvest. As soon as the harvest is done, though, we shall have to come out with 'em at daybreak and stay all day, not even going home for breakfast or dinner. Then, I can tell you, it becomes a tedious business. Sometimes, when it's very hot, two others take our places at mid-day."

"I wonder that the 'boss,' as that nigger calls him, is not afraid of your running away and taking the horse and cattle with you," said Arthur, smiling for the first time since his arrival at the farm.

"He knows there is no fear of that. The man who steals cattle or horses out here is pretty sure to be lynched if they catch him. He knows that I hate him too much to give him the satisfaction of seeing my carcase dangling from the bough of a tree. Not much!"

"By the way," said Arthur, "how and when do you send to the post?"

"Emerson or his brother always goes—but neither of them will go until the wheat is in."

"I suppose they don't tamper with the letters?"

"You had better suppose nothing of the kind. I'll bet there's never a letter sent by

any of us but that he doesn't know the contents."

"Then, how do you manage?"

"This way; when we've got any important letters we are afraid of his seeing or stopping, we keep them till a day when we know he is busy, and will not be coming out on the prairie to look us up while tending the cattle. Then we drive the beasts three or four miles over in the direction of Elton, and then I, being the lightest, gallop over there, post the letters, and ride back as quickly as possible, my chum looking after the animals during my absence. That's the way we fool John Emerson."

"Then, I had better wait until we get a chance like that?"

"Yes; the first time I am out with the herd all day I'll post them for you, or if you are with me, you can take them yourself, and I'll mind the beasts by myself till you return. It isn't a big herd you see, and one chap can easily tend them while they're grazing. It's the rounding up and driving in that takes two."

They drove all the animals into the enclosure, unsaddled their horses, and put them in the shed, which was called a stable, and

walked off to the wheat field, where they resumed the same drudgery at which they had been employed before breakfast.

At noon Mrs Emerson's shrill whistle was heard, announcing that the dinner-hour had arrived, and the farmer, with his brother and his seven pupils, ceased work and returned to the house, two of the boys being told off to feed and water the reaping-machine horses. The dinner was very similar to the supper of the night before and to the breakfast of the early morning. It was served on a clothless table, with an unplaned surface, and consisted of boiled beef and potatoes, corn bread and molasses, the beverage being water of a rather muddy colour. After dinner, they all rested for half-an-hour, and then returned to the field to resume harvesting operations.

At five o'clock Arthur and Fred Summers were again despatched to take the cattle to pasture for two hours, and, on their return at the expiration of that time, they found "Sal" awaiting their arrival, with instructions from her husband for them to feed and water the horses, give the pigs their dinners, and see that everything was made snug for the night. At eight o'clock all sat down to a supper of corn bread and cold pork, corn bread and

molasses, and Arthur's first day's work as a pupil on a Western farm was at an end. The lad was so tired and stiff that he could scarcely eat, and immediately the meal was over he left the table and went to bed.

Just as he had stretched himself out on his comfortless bench and drawn the blanket over him, the two Summers's came into the room, also with the object of retiring.

"Well, and what do you think of it after your first day?" asked the elder of the two brothers.

"I think," replied Arthur, slowly raising himself up a little in his bed, "that we have found the hell with which my uncle always threatened me. I can't imagine anything worse than this. The life of a convict can't be worse. As you said last night, it is 'white slavery.' "

"Yes," said Fred Summers, "there is no doubt it is a hell. Here we perform all this drudgery and toil, working like niggers from dawn to sunset, and yet at the end of the day we have not earned a penny, we have not even been repaid with a decent meal, and we have not as comfortable quarters to rest our limbs in as the horses we have been using."

"I can understand a man roughing it a bit when he is hard pushed," answered Arthur; "or I can understand a fellow making shift with such a bed as this for a night or two when out shooting, but I cannot see how a man can have the conscience to utilise our work as Emerson does, and to receive money in premiums or quarterly payments from our people for our keep as he does, and then to treat us in this manner—to work us like mules and to feed us like swine. D—— his corn bread and cold pork ! What is this corn bread ?"

"It's bread made from Indian corn ; it takes about a year to get accustomed to it when it is well made, but it would take ten years to degrade your sense of taste to such an extent as to be able to eat with any relish what Gabe makes."

"And this is life on a farm in the Far West," groaned Arthur. "This is the existence to which my uncle has condemned me—my uncle who writes long letters to the papers about providing free libraries and instructive lectures for the entertainment of the labouring classes in country villages, in order to make their evenings more cheerful and draw them from the public-houses."

"A 'pub.' would be very welcome here," rejoined Fred, "only we couldn't patronise it on account of having no money. Talk about making evenings more cheerful, your uncle had better do something for ours in winter. It's pitch dark at four in the afternoon, and from then till bed-time we generally sit and stare at each other in that dreary hole they call a dining-room. Sometimes we play cards a bit; and Hughes has a chess-board."

"Aren't there any books?"

"Emerson has a few, but we know them by heart. They are mostly on farming, or cattle, or horses."

"No newspapers?"

"Sometimes some of us get some old English newspapers, but nothing else in the shape of a paper ever reaches us. Emerson doesn't take any, except a weekly rag that comes from Chicago, and he rarely offers that to us. When he has finished with it, 'Sal' uses it to light the fire in order that we sha'n't get hold of it. Then he takes a monthly called the *American Agriculturist*, but it's a special mark of favour if he ever offers that to any one. He stores them up for the sake of the hints they give."

"Yes," interposed Harry Summers, "he

needs a few hints occasionally. I don't believe he knew wheat from oats when he first came here. He wasn't a farmer in England."

"What was he?" asked Vallance.

"No one knows except his wife and brother, and they won't tell."

"Something a cut above what he is now, I fancy," said Fred Summers. "You see, he's coarse and rough, but somehow he talks as if he had at one time mingled with a better class, and so does his brother. As for 'Sal,' she'd disgrace a laundry. I dare-say he was a steward or clerk, or something of that sort, and perhaps got into trouble and came out here. He can write a fair letter."

"Do they live on the same fare as they give us?" asked Arthur.

"Indeed, they don't," answered Fred. "In their room they live on the fat of the prairie — eggs, chickens, and ducks, and all sorts of game and poultry form the staple articles on their breakfast and dinner table. In the winter we get game occasionally, because it costs nothing; but they never kill more than one fowl, or turkey, or duck at a time, and they take care to eat it all up

before they kill another. The nigger always gets the remnants."

"Well," said Arthur, "I intend to write home about it, and as soon as I get the money I shall cut back to England. When I come of age I shall have money of my own, and I don't intend to be exiled in this way. If I can get enough we three will bolt."

"If we could get enough to get to Chicago we would be satisfied," said the elder brother; "we would be sure to find something to do there that would keep us alive. Besides, if we once got away, father would have to know it, and then he would help us. He was always kind enough to us until his second wife presented him with a beastly little kid, and then he seemed to lose all interest in us, and let my stepmother do anything she liked. She's thirty years younger than he is, but he's scared to death of her."

"Yes," interposed Fred, "it used to be a sight to see our old governor dancing up and down with the squalling brat in his arms, but when the second one came he completely lost his head. It was after that that we were turned out. She said that we were horrid common boys, and that her babies shouldn't grow up in the house with us, and that if the

governor didn't send us away she should take her two brats and live apart from him. So we were kicked out, and the young Mrs Summers and her two brats rule the roost."

Arthur made no response, for in the last few moments, while the two brothers had still been talking, he had suddenly dropped asleep.

The next morning, Gabe pounded on the wooden wall with his thick stick at daybreak as before, and a second day followed precisely similar to the first, and then the days ran into weeks, and young Vallance found himself quite settled down to the level of a farm labourer. He wrote to his uncle, and he wrote to Violet, enclosing a letter for her mother, in which he told her that he had been robbed of every penny he had, and that his position was so hateful and his life so miserable, that he intended to run away and come home as soon as he could obtain the money; and he asked Mrs Carlisle to lend him the necessary funds, and trusting him to pay it back as soon as he got control of his own fortune, or, perhaps, sooner. These letters he posted at Elton, one day when he and Fred Summers were out tending cattle.

After these were despatched, he grew more

hopeful, feeling confident that he would soon have the means of leaving his present desolate life and returning to England. Several times he had thought of writing to Miss Cora Blanchard, as she had told him to do if he should need assistance, but he could never summon up the courage, on account of feeling that he would be obliged to confess the Miss Minnie Sharp episode, and being convinced that to do so must make him appear such a hopeless idiot in her eyes that very likely she might decline to take any further notice of him, or reply to his letter.

CHAPTER XIV.

INSUBORDINATION AT SQUARE MILE FARM.

FIVE, six, seven weeks passed, and no response came from Arthur's uncle, or from Violet, or from Mrs Carlisle, and the boy began to grow fearful that his letters had been lost. Then he wrote again, begging for an immediate reply. To Violet, he penned a long, loving letter, bewailing his absence from her, and beseeching that she would relieve the wretchedness of his life by letting him see her handwriting as soon as possible.

But still no answers came, and summer and autumn passed without his ever having received a message of any sort from England since he had sailed from Liverpool. The bleak, dreary, and hard winter of the North-West set in with its usual rigour, the mercury in the thermometer sank below zero, and the ground became like iron. The piercing,

northerly winds swept the prairie, and whistled and howled round the buildings of Square Mile Farm, shaking them to their very foundations, and making the farm pupils shiver with the draughts which rushed in at various crevices. The days commenced at about eight o'clock in the morning, and closed at about four in the afternoon, and the frost put an end to all work except tending the stock and doing little "carpentering" operations in the house. Even Mr Emerson's private room was so chilly that he put some of his pupils to work, papering it with several coats of old newspapers.

The youths took long brisk walks in the icy atmosphere to stimulate their circulation, and keep them healthy, and sometimes they went sliding on a frozen stream near by, but as there was not a single pair of skates amongst them with which to skate, they were deprived of that exhilarating pastime and only consolation for the discomforts of Arctic weather, and had to be content with watching the master of the establishment and his brother indulge in it.

Then came a heavy fall of snow, which covered the entire country with a fleecy white coat, several feet thick, and Mr

Emerson, having made the boys burnish up his sleigh, took long drives in it with his wife and brother all over the prairie. But there was no such recreation for the lads, there being only one sleigh on the place, and all that they were allowed to do with this was to put in and take out the horses and clean it. These were parts of their duties as farm pupils.

That they could desire any amusement or recreation, never entered their teacher's head, and if it had entered his wife's, she would have taken very good care that their desires should not be fulfilled.

Just before Christmas, Arthur received a letter from his uncle, and, at the sight of it, his hopes revived; possibly it contained money and permission to return home. It did contain money, if a postal order for £2 to a youth in such despair as he was in can be dignified by the name. The trumpery amount sent and the contents of the letter chilled his senses, and almost made him cry out with rage and disappointment. The epistle contained a brief homily, and ran as follows,—

“ *MY DEAR ARTHUR,—I have received all*

your letters. I am sorry that you have wasted so much time in writing me things that I know to be false. Before I sent you out to Mr Emerson, I made searching inquiries about him, and found that he was a gentleman of the highest integrity, and one specially fitted to look after and train young men like yourself. What you say about your food and sleeping accommodation is all nonsense and invention. Mr Emerson's farm is well-known, and dozens of boys who were with him are doing splendidly. I enclose you £2, and will send the same sum again at Easter. I am very glad you are obliged to work hard. Such work is beneficial to the body, though nothing, I fear, will ever benefit your mind. When I hear better accounts from Mr Emerson, I will consider the advisability of having you home for a holiday, but it would interfere with your studies and work to let you home until you have been there for a year.—Your affectionate uncle,

“T. ALLEN REDWOOD.”

He crushed the letter in his hand, and glared defiantly round the room. The other boys were all there, but though they noticed

his anger and distress, they made no comment, and asked no question, for each one of them, having undergone similar disappointments, knew by intuition what was the matter.

By the mail which had brought Mr Redwood's letter to Arthur, there also came one from the same gentleman to John Emerson, and it was not long before the latter revealed to young Vallance part of the subject-matter of his uncle's communication. The unhappy youth was called into the private room, where he found Mr Emerson walking up and down, and Mrs Emerson sitting glum and stern before the stove.

"I have had a letter from your uncle," commenced the farm pupil teacher, "in which he says that you have been making several complaints against this establishment. If you have anything to complain of, why not complain to me?"

"Yes, why not?" said Mrs Emerson, fiercely, craning her long neck towards him.

"I thought that I had complained pretty often," replied Arthur, coolly.

"About what?" asked Mrs Emerson.

"About everything: about the wretched

food, and about that miserable shed you call a dormitory; about the dirty menial work we have to do, and the misery of the life altogether."

"You are treated the same as all the others," answered Mr Emerson. "But I've noticed for some time that you've been trying to create a disturbance. Now, I've sent for you to give you warning that unless you stop it, and are more courteous and obedient to my wife and myself, I'll find means of checking it. You know the little cabin next to the kitchen, where the cook sleeps. I've used that room as a prison-cell once or twice before, and have made Gabe sleep in the kitchen. I'll use it again next time you become obstreperous; and if once you get into it, you'll stay there for a month. It is not a very cheerful place, as there's no window to it, and it gets its light from a little hole in the door opening to the kitchen."

"And while you are in it," added Sal, spitefully, wringing her long fingers in glee at the idea, "I'll see that you live on bread and water. Not a morsel of meat will you get — only the dryest old bits of corn bread."

"You daren't do such a thing," replied

Vallance, defiantly. "Such a thing daren't be done in these days. I would burn the house down if you tried it. Yes, I would die first. If you ever lock one of us up again, we'll burn you out."

"You will, will you?" said Emerson, changing countenance somewhat at this daring threat. "Is that the plan you've proposed to my pupils?"

"That's what we'll do if ever you lock one of us up in that hole again. We'll burn down every stick of timber on the place."

"And what do you think would become of you?"

"We'd all make our way to Fargo, and try for work; or, perhaps, I would go to Sam Hicks."

"I have heard of him; he is the rowdiest ruffian in the country."

"He's a gentleman compared to you; and if he knew that you had called him a ruffian, he would ride thirty miles to have it out with you. You can be very high-cock-o-lorum with a few unarmed boys, but you are what Gabe calls 'pore white trash' compared to Hicks, and you'd soon be glad to eat humble pie."

"Shut your mouth this instance," yelled

Mrs Emerson, with very much more vigour than dignity.

"Hush, Sal," said her brother; "let's hear him out. It's better for us to know what these young conspirators are up to."

"Is it, indeed?" retorted Arthur, sneeringly. "Well, that's what we are up to. The first time you try your heroic measures by imprisoning one of us, we set every building in the place on fire; and we'll go to Elton and to Sam Hicks, and tell why we did it."

"You'd be lynched out here for such a thing."

"More likely that Sam Hicks and his friends would ride over and lynch you. He's the sort of man to do it, but you are all bluff."

"You'd better think twice, Vallance, before plunging into open rebellion," Mr Emerson said, in a tone that tended toward conciliation; "you'd better think twice."

"You had better think three times before driving us to desperation," returned Arthur. "I mean what I say. If you attempt to lock one of us up in that hole, there'll be a conflagration here that will illuminate the prairie for miles around."

"That isn't fit talk for an English boy. Your uncle complains bitterly of your past bad conduct, rebellion, and recklessness."

"I am not playing the part of an English boy any longer. The last few months have made me a man. I am a Westerner, and I intend to shape my course after the pattern of Sam Hicks. As to my uncle, you needn't quote him."

"Let me read you a bit of his letter."

"I don't want to hear his letter, but fire away."

John Emerson drew an envelope from his pocket, and taking out of it and opening a sheet of note-paper closely written upon, turned the latter over two or three times till he found what he was seeking, and then read aloud :—

"As I said before, it will be necessary for you to rule my nephew with an iron hand. An unyielding demand for implicit obedience on his part towards your instructions, and the enforcement of that obedience—if necessary, by the most severe measures—are the only means of dealing with a young man so rebellious as he is. I have the most perfect faith

in your ability to govern and manage him, and I leave him entirely in your hands, to be dealt with in whatever manner your experience and knowledge of character may dictate."

He refolded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and said,—

"There, that is what your uncle says. What do you think of it?"

"I think it is just what I should have expected. All my life he has been trying to goad me to my ruin."

"From the way you're going on, you'll get there without much goading," said Mrs Emerson, maliciously.

"You won't be much of an ornament, wherever you go," retorted Arthur. "We all know you play first fiddle in this place; but it is a deuced poor tune you play, and we don't think much of the second and third fiddles for echoing it."

"John!" exclaimed Mrs Emerson, rising from her chair, "there's going to be a rebellion here. We had better take steps to nip it in the bud."

"What would you advise, Sal?"

"Lock him up in Gabe's room until he

apologises ; and if he doesn't apologise in forty-eight hours, we'll flog him."

For a moment the latter suggestion surprised and almost appalled the youth ; but after a moment's hesitation, with flashing eyes and a livid face, he strode up to Mrs Emerson, and, glaring fiercely into her cold, stony orbs, he hissed, in tones pregnant with force and determination,—

" If any of you three ever attempt to put a hand upon me, I'll blow out the brains of your John and his brother, and we'll leave you here alone on this prairie, with nothing but the ashes of these buildings to relieve your solitude. I am an English gentleman, and, though I am young, no one shall ever flog me and live."

The woman was taken aback by his vehemence, and turned her head nervously towards her husband, as though to appeal to him to come to her relief ; but a sudden movement of Arthur's right hand to that portion of the body where the revolver is accustomed to lie snug and ready, warned the professor of farming that his pupil was armed.

The knowledge came to him as a shock, and for a moment completely paralysed both his speech and his movements. He

had generally taken care to assure himself that none of his lads were provided with any sort of weapon, and when occasionally one of them had arrived possessing such a thing, he had always confiscated it. By a strange oversight he had forgotten to inquire whether Arthur Vallance had a pistol; now he found to his chagrin that the boy owned not only a "shooter" of some kind, but had also the courage to use it. His own revolver lay in a locked drawer, and his rifle was in the kitchen, so he speedily recognised that his pupil had the best of the argument.

"There is no occasion," he commenced in a deprecatory voice, "no occasion whatever to have a row about this. My wife was not in earnest in what she said, and I have no idea of using extreme measures. It seems to me that we ought to try to get along together better than we do. When you wish to complain, you should come to me, not write such denunciatory letters of me to your people."

Instinct at once told Arthur that for some reason or other he was master of the situation, but the same instinct cautioned him that the man with whom he was dealing was a cur, and that no dependence could be

placed in his insipid apology. Still, he realised that it would be best to terminate the present quarrel, and to appear to acquiesce in Mr Emerson's proposition for a better understanding between them. So he walked a few steps away from Mrs Emerson, and, addressing her husband, said,—

"It is you who have got to make the advances for a better agreement. We cannot, and will not, stand your bullying any longer. We are quite willing to work, and to do anything that any ordinary pupil ought to do, though we don't admit that you are in any respect qualified to take farm pupils, but we will not be treated like dogs or niggers, and the first time you attempt to imprison or flog any of us, we will set fire to every building and every rick on the place; there shall be nothing left here but a pile of ashes. And more than that, we will shoot every animal on the farm. That is what we will do if we are not treated better, but we are willing to have peace if we are."

"Well, I'll think about it," replied the farmer. "I did not know the boys were so discontented, but as to you burning us out, that is all bluff."

"Very well; try whether it is, if you like."

"John," said Mrs Emerson, shaking her head and winking her eye at her husband, "you know what Vallance's uncle has said about him; he is capable of anything."

"I don't believe, Sal, that he would be guilty of such a crime as that," replied the farmer.

"It's a spiritless worm that doesn't turn when trodden on," was Arthur's retort. "We haven't shown much spirit up to now, but we'll show it in future."

"Well," said Emerson slowly, and in a measured self-assertive manner, which Arthur interpreted as indicating that he was cowed, but didn't mean to admit it, "we'll see what can be done. A farm out here must of course be a dull place at this time of the year. Return to your companions now, and Mrs Emerson and I will talk over the matter."

Arthur Vallance left the room, and rejoining the other boys, who were all sitting round the stove in the shed called a dining-room, recounted to them the story of the row that had just occurred. They were elated at hearing of the manner in which the bully

had been defied, but two or three of them felt serious misgivings as to the future effect of that defiance, for they believed that, however peaceably disposed John Emerson and his wife might pretend to be, they would perpetually be designing some means of bringing them into subjection, and punishing them for this outbreak. There was only one thing, they thought, in their favour, and that was that these two were so sordid and avaricious, that they would be loath to do anything which might bring about the loss or flight of any of their pupils. But the two Summers took brighter views of the matter, and the younger one boldly asserted that now the gauntlet had been thrown down, and the trumpet of war sounded, they must band themselves together as one man, and firmly assert their rights.

"Together," he said, jumping up and shaking his fist at the door, which led towards the Emersons' room, "we stand, but divided we fall! I am in favour of standing. Down with 'Sal!' Down with the two bullies! Down with cold pork, and stale corn bread!"

"Down with 'Sal,' is it?"

The question, spoken in a shrill feminine voice, came not from any of young Summers' companions, but from Mrs Emerson herself, who had suddenly opened the door, and was now standing on the threshold, angrily facing the youthful orator.

Lank and gaunt she looked indeed, as the light of the lamp shone full upon her bony figure, upon her long arms and neck, and her angular features; her five feet ten of humanity being clothed in an old grey cap and a tight-fitting, seedy-looking plaid ulster. A few generations ago such an appearance as she presented at that moment would have been considered by many superstitious people as quite sufficient justification for burning her as a witch.

"Down with Sal, is it?" she asked again.

"Down with Sal, it is!" cried out Fred Summers, who, having recovered from his momentary surprise, was resolved to stick to his guns. "We'll have no more grey mares riding rough-shod over us. Down with you, and your cold pork and stale bread! Down with white slavery like we endure here."

"You are all gone mad!" Mrs Emerson exclaimed, and, without another word, she

turned away and slammed the door behind her.

The next minute an outburst of laughter, such as she had never before heard in that establishment, resounded in her ears, and she knew that it was at her expense.

For a little while the young men found amusement and diversion in the turn affairs had taken, but after these had worn out, they commenced to discuss the serious side of the case, and before they retired that night, a solemn compact had been made between them all, that if the slightest personal violence were used towards any of them, or an attempt made to lock up one of them in the nigger's den, they would band together to rescue their comrade, and having rescued him, would fire the buildings, and then leave in a body.

The next morning, however, heralded in more peaceful prospects, for John Emerson made a little speech to the youths while they were at breakfast, urging them not to take any reckless step which they would be bound to regret immediately afterwards, and assuring them that they had a very much better time of it than most other farm pupils out West.

“Farming,” he said, in conclusion, “must be always a rough and hard life out in these parts, and at present you are really apprentices, which is, of course, the hardest time of all. I lodge and feed and instruct you, and in return I only get your unskilled labour and the small sums paid by your friends. I cannot afford to feed you like you would be fed at a New York hotel, nor can I afford to let you work or not work as you please.”

“Other farmers,” replied Arthur, who had lately been looked upon by his companions as their leader, “can afford to pay their labourers for working, in addition to lodging and feeding them ; but you, instead of paying us, extort money from our people for allowing us to work for you, and even then you make us work harder than any paid labourer would dream of doing.”

“No ; that is not so. What you do is about the same as labourers do on all farms. The knowledge you gain by this practical experience will be invaluable.”

“No doubt it will, especially to me who had no idea of living out here, or farming anywhere. And, perhaps, you would suggest that the injury done to our constitutions by over-work and bad food will also be invaluable—it

probably will to those who want to get rid of us. We are quite willing to admit that we are prisoners, and that you are our jailer, but but you must loosen the bonds a bit. A prison mutiny is very often a dangerous thing for the jailer."

" You must cease to look on it in that light —you are apprentices to me, and I am therefore entitled to your services. But since you have all complained, I am quite willing to try to make it pleasanter for you here if I can. My wife is responsible for the housekeeping, but I will ask her to give you more variety. As for the work, there cannot be too much now."

At the last words he looked ruefully out at the snow-clad prairie and the fierce storm of fine, dust-like snow then raging, and inwardly bewailed the impossibility of utilising in any way the services of all these vigorous young men. And at the same moment Arthur Vallance and some of the other boys let their eyes also wander to that wintry scene, and the reflection was at once forced upon them that a greater power than Emerson was at work keeping them prisoners, for they were literally snowed-up, and any attempt to tramp their way across the country in such a

blizzard as that could only have resulted in their being lost, and dying from exposure and cold. If the intense weather then prevailing should continue, it might be many weeks before either man or beast could venture out any distance upon the prairie. So a truce was concluded between the warring factions, and both sides settled down to the usual routine, which now consisted principally of attending to the stock, keeping clean the pathways to the different sheds, shovelling snow off the roofs, and chopping and carrying in wood to feed the huge fires they were compelled to keep up.

It was a hard and bitter winter, and Arthur Vallance found the existence almost intolerable. He had now given up nearly all hope of ever hearing from Violet or Mrs Carlisle, and his heart was bowed down with disappointment and sorrow. What had happened to them, he could form no idea ; why they did not write he could not imagine ; he only knew that, so far as he was concerned, they were silent as death itself. And thus for him, in wretchedness and dismal monotony, the long wintry days would pass slowly away, while at nights he would lie awake for hours brooding over his troubles, and listening to

the sniffing and growling of the hungry and half-starving wolves which nightly prowled around the farm, vainly seeking some hole or weak spot where they could effect an entrance into the buildings and satisfy their savage appetites with some of the warm humanity, or horses, or cattle, or pigs, which they could scent far away, but of which they could not even get a single mouthful. Every night their hideous music came in the way of a serenade to the inmates of Square Mile Farm, but no one paid any attention, for the house, stables, and sheds were wolf-proof, and the beasts themselves were not worth powder and bullets.

It was not the wolves that interfered with young Vallance's rest, and caused him many sleepless nights ; it was the mysterious silence of Mrs Carlisle and her daughter, and the remembrance of the strange trust that the former had imposed upon him, together with her ominous words, spoken so earnestly, that she had a presentiment of approaching evil. And then, to add to his worry, there was the knowledge that, if anything had happened to Mrs Carlisle, her daughter, the girl of whom he was so fond,

and who had been the sole bright star in the gloomy firmament of his life at Redwood House, would be alone in her helplessness and youth, while he, her rightful protector and only friend, was eking out his life as a prisoner on a prairie farm.

Now that he had seen a little bit of the world, and had gained a small atom of experience, he felt as though he were so big and strong and wise, and would be of such invaluable service to Mrs Carlisle and her daughter in case of trouble. But these thoughts were only when Violet was in his mind. When he reflected on his own situation and his utter helplessness to improve it one iota, he realised how very small indeed were his powers, for lack of funds and stress of weather built for him as strong prison walls as were ever erected by human hands. That forty miles of bleak, frozen, snow-clad prairie which intervened between him and a railway, with a northerly wind sweeping over it at the rate of fifty miles an hour, and with a temperature thirty degrees below zero, causing every living thing upon it to perish, was as impassable a barrier as a sea of boiling water.

CHAPTER XV.

MOTHER ! MOTHER ! MOTHER !

AFTER Arthur Vallance's banishment from Redwood House, the unruffled calm in which Mrs Carlisle and her daughter lived at River Lawn became more unruffled than ever. The only visitor who had crossed the threshold of that establishment in all the years during which they had tenanted it had now sailed for parts beyond the seas, and their monotonous life grew more monotonous than before, unbroken by the sound of a strange voice or a glimpse of a fresh face, just as it had been previous to the day, now long ago, on which young Vallance had been capsized into the river, and Violet had brought him to the house to be dried.

Both mother and daughter grievously missed the company of the youth, who had been an almost daily guest at their tea-table, and the first afternoon succeeding his departure Violet's eyes could not refrain from wander-

ing towards the river, half expecting to see his athletic figure emerge from the bushes and stride across the lawn. For a long time she seemed to have hopes that possibly something had occurred to postpone his leaving, and that he might yet call to say a few more words of farewell, but as night drew near, and there were no signs of his coming, the hope left her, and she stole away from her mother out on to the lawn, and sat and wept under the big tree where she and Arthur had spent so many happy days together.

There was an aching in her heart, accompanied by a seeming void in her future existence, which racked her with pain and convulsed her with sobs. Although only just at the dawn of womanhood, and at an age during which loves and friendships are supposed to be of an ephemeral nature and barely worthy of notice, her young heart, in all its purity and innocence, had gone out to this boy, with an intensity of passion and a depth of feeling that would have done credit to any twenty-five-year-old Venus, and Arthur's absence now created a vacuum in her life, which at present, at all events, it was impossible to fill.

And then the isolation and solitude of River Lawn suddenly became irksome to her, and she

wandered about beside the stream in a state of restless discontent, thinking fondly of her boy lover, and sometimes pondering with a puzzled mind over the friendless condition of her mother and herself. The latter, of course, led to her asking herself questions, first and foremost of which were—"Why do we live here in this solitary manner? Why don't we have friends like the people I read about? Why does Martha treat casual visitors or strangers straying this way as though they were burglars? Why does my mother shut herself up like a nun?"

But her inexperienced mind and her extreme innocence precluded her from being able to imagine any solution of the problem, and although such questions, once having entered her head, returned again and again with unceasing persistence, not a suspicion of her mother, or an idea of any dark secret, ever rose up before her. She knew that her parent had suffered some great trial, which apparently had risen up like a gulf between them and the social world; but what that trial was she had never learnt, and she had never asked, though now, as she roamed about the little place all alone, or sat on those rustic seats where so often Arthur had sat beside her,

she began to wonder why it was that she did not know, and whether she had not a right to be informed.

Mrs Carlisle speedily noticed that her child was brooding and melancholy, but attributed the girl's state of mind to grief at the absence of her young friend, and to the lonely feeling which must necessarily be concomitant with the loss of her companion. It never occurred to the mother that the daughter's acquaintance with, and love for her youthful playmate, had tended to hasten her awakening womanhood, and that one of the first contingencies of the transformation from child to young woman would be inquiries and wonderings as to the causes of the peculiar circumstances under which they lived.

Several times, indeed, and some months ago, Violet had put embarrassing questions to her mother, but the first hint which Mrs Carlisle received as to the nature of the problems which were puzzling her child's brain was when, on the second day after Arthur's departure, the young lady suddenly startled her by asking,—

“Mother, why don't people visit us, and invite us to their parties like they do every one else? I can't understand why you insist

on standing so entirely aloof from every one. We have never known anyone but my Arthur, and you know we only got to know him because I fished him out of the river, and he had to be brought in to dry. If he could have been hung up on a clothes-line, like a petticoat, I don't suppose we should ever have seen him again after Martha had taken him down."

Mrs Carlisle looked startled and embarrassed as she replied, with evident discomfiture,—

"Violet, it has been my intention for several days to tell you something of the reasons for our living as we do, but it is a painful story to tell—even as much as I must tell you, which will not be all—and I have put it off from day to day."

"Then put it off again, dear mother, if it is so very painful, and forgive me for bothering about it. I cannot help wondering why we are not like other people."

"Do you want to be like other people? Are you longing for society?"

"Yes, mother, I am longing to see what the world and people are like. I want to see something of all those scenes and various features of life of which we only know through the papers. Since I have lost

Arthur I feel like a wild bird in a cage, which is pining and yearning to fly forth. I cannot help it. Everything mystifies me so."

"I have done you great wrong, child, in not sending you to school, where you would have been with other girls of your own age, and learnt many things I could not teach you. But I couldn't part with you. I had nothing on earth but you."

"Don't reproach yourself, mother, about that. You have taught me probably more than I should have learnt at school, because you see we have nothing to do here but to read and study, study and read. And then, I daresay, young ladies at school don't know so very much about the world. It is the world I long for."

"No; I don't think young ladies at school do know so very much about the world. In fact, perhaps not so much as you know, in a certain way. For instance, no schoolmistresses would allow their pupils to devour newspapers and peruse novels as you do."

"Oh, I couldn't get on now without the papers. I love to read all about the world and people I have never seen. They are the greatest 'popular educator' to an isolated

little hermit like myself. I wish we could go to London."

"We will go, dear. I have been very selfish and blind to shut you up like this. We will go next week, and when we are there I will tell you something that it has been on my mind to tell you for many days."

"Not if it pains you, you sha'n't tell it. Let us go to London and forget it. We will try to be jolly there—as jolly as we can without Arthur. I hope he will hate that farm in America, and come back at once. Then we might all three go to London together again, or perhaps we could go to Paris."

"It takes a good deal of money to travel about, and, after travelling, one is never contented to settle down again in the old hum-drum style."

"But we don't want to settle down again in the old hum-drum style. It is the old humdrum style that has so palled on me. And as for money, mother, surely we are not poor? You always seem to have plenty of money."

"Yes, dear, I have plenty to live on down here, and to save a little, too. But I am saving up for you."

"Why save up for me? I shall marry

Arthur some day, and then you will live with us. We might as well spend all our income as it comes in. It is no use saving for me. What you and Arthur have will be plenty for us three."

Mrs Carlisle smiled, but made no immediate response. Her anxiety to see her child in more cheerful spirits was so great that she was quite willing to humour the girl in any fancy that might enter her head. And, for some time afterwards, mother and daughter discussed the places and sights they would go to see in London, and Mrs Carlisle even had to promise that they would visit all the theatres at which the most successful plays were being performed. And Violet's heart just fluttered with excitement when she contemplated that, in a few days, she would be going to see the leading lights of the English stage, and would be able to watch the acting of those men and women of whom she was continually reading in the papers, but who seemed as far away from her life as any of the heroes of mythology.

Mrs Carlisle, however, did not lapse into similar ecstacies over the visit to London ; on the contrary, the prospect seemed rather to trouble and depress her. Two or three times

during the following day she would appear to be on the eve of revealing some momentous secret to her daughter, and then, after hesitating and growing crimson, would abruptly turn the conversation to some trivial matter of which neither was thinking. At other times she would stealthily and pensively contemplate her child's features, as though endeavouring to gain by study a closer insight into the girl's character and disposition than sixteen years of motherhood had been able to give her.

During the morning of that day she had occupied herself for over two hours in writing a letter which, when completed, did not consist of two pages of written matter, and, as was her frequent custom, she herself walked to a village letter-box a mile distant, and posted it. The incident had its effect on Violet, whose perceptive faculties seemed suddenly to have undergone a considerable extension, and who watched her mother as anxiously as any nurse could watch a patient, saying nothing, but assuring herself that a change of scene and air would do them both a lot of good.

A couple of evenings later, at about ten o'clock, Miss Carlisle was playing some of

her favourite airs on the piano, when her mother came and stood behind her, caressing with her fingers the flowing tresses which hung loosely down her daughter's back. Then, after a few minutes, she stooped down and kissed her on the cheek, and said,—

“I am going for a little walk on the lawn, Vie, dear; and I want you to play till I come back. The window is wide open, and I shall be within hearing all the time. Don't stop till I return. I want to listen to you while I think.”

“All right, mother, dear,” was the reply, accompanied by a fond caress; “I will play your favourite airs, but if you stay out long I shall come and bring you in. You seem worried to-night, and I ought to have tried to cheer you up, instead of depressing you with my doleful tunes.”

“Don't talk nonsense, Vie,” Mrs Carlisle answered, smiling back at her daughter as she left the room.

Violet continued to play for nearly an hour after her mother had gone out on the lawn, and then, wearying of it, she closed the piano, and, walking to the open window, peered out into the garden. It was a hot, sultry night, and although many stars in the firmament

twinkled dimly through the haze, which partially obscured the sky, River Lawn was enveloped in darkness, and objects were indiscernible at a distance of only a few feet, except where they happened to be in the rays of the lamp which was burning brightly in the sitting-room.

Not being able to see her mother, Violet left the drawing-room and went out into the garden, leaving the door open, so that the hall lamp might assist in lighting the grounds. After walking across the entire length of the lawn she turned and peered in all directions. Not a sign of any one could she see. Then, all at once some strange misgiving or presentiment seemed to possess her, for she cried out in sharp, anxious tones,—

“Mother! Mother!”

No response, however, came to her cry, and so intense was the surrounding quiet that, as she listened eagerly for an answer, she could hear her heart thumping away like a steam engine. But that, accompanied by a slight murmur of the river below, was the only audible sound.

Now, she became really frightened, and called out in a voice that spoke volumes of distress,

“Mother! Mother! Mother!”

Again she strained her ears to catch the first note of her parent's reply, but after the reverberation of her own shrill call through the woods had died away, the deathly stillness remained unbroken, until suddenly, up in the big tree close beside her, an owl gave vent to a long plaintive hoot. This so unnerved her that she ran quickly down the lawn and rushed through the house into the kitchen.

“Where's mother, Martha?”

The stalwart woman, who formed the entire establishment of River Lawn, looked up anxiously at her young mistress's pale face, and replied,—

“I don't know, miss; I thought she was with you; she hasn't been in here for two hours.”

“Oh, where can she have gone? And it is so dark in the woods to-night.”

“She didn't tell me she was going out, miss. Perhaps, she's in her bedroom.”

“We'll go and see, but she went out on the lawn, and I haven't heard her come in. But let us go and look. Come on; I can't go without you—I feel so strangely nervous now. That horrid owl startled me so.”

Martha took up the kitchen lamp and,

closely followed by Violet, ascended the stairs and entered Mrs Carlisle's bedroom. A single glance sufficed to show that it was unoccupied, and that no one had entered it since the servant had prepared it for the night, for in front of the toilet table stood the arm chair in which Mrs Carlisle always sat to do her hair, the bed clothes were neatly turned down, with the night-gown laid tidily across the bed and hanging over its side, while on the floor, just beneath the skirt of the night-gown, was placed a pair of slippers. Everything was in perfect order ; neither a brush, nor a hairpin, nor a single article of raiment had been displaced since Martha put the room in order for her mistress's retirement.

They left that chamber and looked into Violet's, which adjoined it. The same order and regularity prevailed here. Nothing in it had been disturbed since it had been made ready for her going to bed.

Then they wandered through every room in the house, and their search having proved fruitless, Martha left the lamp in the front hall and, accompanied by Violet, stepped out into the garden.

They walked down one side and up another, peering into the summer-house and under the

trees, but seeing nothing. Once more Violet screamed aloud in distress and fear,—

“Mother! Mother! Mother! Do come, mother!”

And once more the only response she received was the hooting of an owl in the big tree. Martha now tried what her powerful lungs could do, and yelled at the top of a voice that must have reached half a mile,—

“Mrs Carlisle! Mrs Carlisle!”

Still no reply came; but the owl, which had answered before, not liking the sounds about him, took flight with a great whirr and flutter.

“What are we to do?” asked Violet, linking her arm into that of her servant; “she said she was only going out into the lawn, and that was nearly two hours ago. It is almost twelve o’clock. Where can she be?”

“I don’t know, miss, where she can have gone,” was the servant’s reply. “She’s never gone out like this before. I suppose we will have to bide patiently until she comes back.”

“But something must have happened to her. She would never do this unless something had happened. I am frightened, Martha. I feel a strange, uncanny sort of feeling. I am frightened more than I can tell.”

"Don't be frightened, miss, she'll be back soon now. It is strange, but there's no occasion to be frightened."

They walked in silence, arm in arm, once more round the lawn, and then passed through the bushes and stood on the edge of the cliff overlooking the river, mutely contemplating the dark water as it flowed sluggishly by. From the moment her eyes beheld the stream gliding smoothly along in the black night, an awful dread took possession of Violet's soul, and the unhappy girl gazed down upon the water with horror, and yet feeling a strange fascination for it.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE WOODS.

MARTHA and Violet stood perfectly still and silent for several minutes, staring down at the water beneath them. Not only for the young lady, but also for the servant, the sight seemed suddenly to possess a certain attraction, which conjured up morbid thoughts and terrible fears. Neither of them had spoken, not a verbal hint of what the one was thinking, in terror and dread, had been given to the other, and yet at the same moment, when their eyes had simultaneously lit upon the gloomy, slowly moving stream, black as ink, and weird and sombre in its unceasing movement, similar horrible fears had instantly taken possession of their minds, as though some occult communication had passed from the watery depths to each of them.

Neither could find words to tell to her com-

panion the frightful apprehension which had crept so swiftly and insidiously into her soul, but each one tightly clutched the other and looked down with awe, and dire misgivings upon the current which rolled slowly on, feeling an innate conviction that in the bosom of those waters would be found the clue to Mrs Carlisle's mysterious absence.

After some time had elapsed, Martha found voice to speak, saying,—

“Come away, miss. Come back to the house. She may have come in, and will be looking for us.”

They turned away from the cliff and went back into the cottage, only to find it empty and deserted, with everything just as they had left it.

Violet was far too frightened to separate from Martha, and, still clutching her servant's arm, she accompanied her to the kitchen, that seeming at the moment the most desirable refuge to which to resort.

“You are looking like a ghost, miss,” said the faithful domestic, placing her young mistress in the kitchen arm-chair. “I shall make you a cup of tea.”

“Oh, don't speak to me of ghosts, Martha,” cried Violet, putting both her hands to her

temples and rocking her body to and fro. “I am frightened—dreadfully frightened !”

“Don’t take on like that, miss ; I am sure missus will be back soon now. You know, miss, of late I’ve noticed that her mind seems to go wandering a bit, and I expect as she’s gone wandering with it to-night. She’s likely in the wood.”

“Do you mean, Martha, that you think mother has been queer lately ?” asked Violet, ceasing to rock, and sitting up in her chair, looking fixedly at the servant.

“Oh no, miss, not exactly that,” was the quick response ; “but absent-minded, miss, and seeming like as if she was worried more than usual.”

Miss Carlisle remained silent for a minute, clasping her hands round one of her knees, and rocking to and fro as before. Presently she said in a hushed, awe-stricken voice,—

“Martha, did you think anything dreadful when you looked down into the river ?”

“Anything dreadful, miss ; whatever do you mean ?”

Violet was silent again for a minute. Then she jumped up abruptly from the chair, and, standing by her servant, placed her hand on

the woman's shoulder saying, in a very low tone,—

"I mean, Martha, did you think, perhaps mother was drowned?"

"Lord 'ave mercy on us, miss, no! What-ever are you thinking of, miss?"

But somehow or other it did not seem that Martha's tones and manner were as full of surprise as her words, and this was instantly noticed by the distressed girl.

"I believe you did, Martha," the latter said. "I believe something has terrified you like it has me. That cliff is so dangerous on a dark night."

"Whatever are you driving at, miss? Surely you don't think as missus has tumbled into the river. That's impossible, miss; she knows every inch of it."

"Martha," and Violet's grasp of her servant's arm tightened perceptibly as she spoke, "when I was looking down into that deep pool in the corner of the cliff near the fence, it seemed for a moment to come into my head that mother might be at the bottom of it, in all those cold flowing waters which look so black and slimy on dark nights."

"Oh, miss, hush!" cried Martha, visibly frightened, but putting one of her brawny

arms round her young mistress's waist ; "that's only fancy, miss. It's what some people call hallelujahjinations."

"No, Martha, I am afraid it is no hallucination. Why should such a dreadful thought come into my head ?"

"Nerves, miss. You're nervous and anxious, and when people is that way, there's no telling what they may see or think, but it's all fancy."

"I didn't say I thought anything. It was a sort of dreadful conviction that seemed to force itself into my mind."

"It's the same thing, miss. It all comes of nervousness."

At that moment the kitchen clock struck one, and Violet, releasing her hold of the servant and walking towards the door, exclaimed,—

"This anxiety is killing me ; I cannot stand it ! Come, Martha ; we must go out again. It is time now to raise an alarm and look for mother. Let us go back to the cliff where we were before."

"Oh, please don't, miss," cried Martha ; "it will only make you more nervous. Let us wait a little while. It is so dark in that corner."

"No; come now. I must go. I am more frightened than you, Martha, but I feel irresistibly drawn to that spot."

The servant made no further objection, but, procuring a warm shawl from the lobby, wrapped it closely around Miss Carlisle's shoulders, and then once more the two went out into the night, and stood upon the steep cliff overlooking the river. Again the same dread, the same indefinable attraction possessed them both, and holding each other in a tight embrace, they stared down into the dark black pool in the corner, with their souls filled with a ghastly fear, and with a terrible foreboding that there was something buried beneath those waters which they both loved and yet recoiled from with awe.

"Martha," whispered Violet, after they had stood in silence for at least five minutes, "mother is down there; I am sure she is down there."

"Oh, come away, miss; please, come away," cried the domestic. "You frighten me with your strange talk. Let us go in and lock the door till daylight. It won't be long now."

"Why should we lock the door? Why should we go away."

"We won't lock it, miss; but, please, come in."

"I don't want to go in. I am going to pray for mother."

"To pray, miss?"

"Yes, pray. Why be so surprised? Do you think, because mother never goes to church or lets me go, that we never say any prayers?"

"I didn't know, miss. I've never seen you or missus praying, and you never does go to church or chapel."

"Perhaps not, but you wouldn't gauge our religion by our attendance at places of public worship, would you; where half the people only go to gaze at the other half, and to be seen there themselves?"

"No, miss; but I've never seen you or missus troubling about prayers or the like."

"Troubling about them? No, I daresay not. They can only be a trouble to those who go through them mechanically for the sake of appearances. Stand close by me, I am going to whisper a short prayer."

And then this girl, who had never, so far as she could remember, seen the interior of a church or listened to a sermon or theological discourse, knelt down on the hard

earth, clasped her hands before her, and prayed.

For a few moments Martha stood by her companion's side, letting her hand rest lightly on the kneeling girl's shoulder, and then, influenced apparently by force of example or some peculiar sympathy, she also dropped on her knees, and added her supplications to those of Violet's, by constantly repeating in a faint whisper a short petition that her young mistress's prayers, whatever they were, might be heard and granted.

Both rose simultaneously, and once more Violet linked her arm in Martha's, and gazed anxiously down at the stream.

"Come, Martha," she said, a moment later, "we must go and raise an alarm. People must come and help to find my mother. This is too dreadful. To be all alone and helpless as we are in the dark."

"It's a mile to the nearest cottage, miss, and it's dreadful dark through the woods. It will be getting light in an hour."

"I won't wait an hour. I am going at once. The idea of talking about dark or distance now. Come along."

And, without waiting for an answer, she walked quickly across the lawn, dragging

Martha after her; but, instead of entering the house, she turned aside and passed through the gate leading into the wood.

Here it was dark as pitch, for the trees and their foliage completely hid the starlit sky, and no grey streaks of daylight were yet appearing in the east, so that the narrow avenue which formed the principal roadway to River Lawn was scarcely discernible. After they had proceeded about a quarter of a mile, they inadvertently left the pathway, and walked into a large bush of brambles.

"Oh, miss," said Martha, "do come back and wait till daylight; we shall be lost in the woods."

"Go back if you want to, Martha," was the curt reply. "I am going on."

"I am afraid more for you than myself, miss. It's dreadful to think of us two lone women being out here in these dark places. My hands are all pricked, miss."

"So are mine. Let us find the path again."

They turned back, and tried to retrace their steps, but, there being nothing to guide them, they soon found themselves hopelessly wandering about among the bushes and trees, getting their hands scratched by brambles

while feeling in front of them, and their faces stung by the twigs and branches of shrubs and young birches. After at least a quarter of an hour's struggling about in this manner, without making the slightest progress towards extricating themselves, and without the faintest idea which direction to take, they finally halted by the trunk of a large tree.

"It's no use, Martha," said Violet, with a little shiver passing through her frame, her voice being almost choked with sobs. "We are lost till daylight. My poor mother."

"We are likely in the same fix as missus, miss. She's just been and come out in this wood and couldn't get back. Lost her way just like us, miss, and won't find it till daylight. It's a wonder we didn't think of that before."

"She never comes out in the wood at night."

"Something brought her out to-night, miss. She's about here somewhere."

"I'll call. She might be near if that is the case."

"Then Violet called aloud through the woods with all the strength her voice could

muster, but no response came back, save the hooting of the owls.

"You try, Martha," she said, leaning her back against the tree, for the strain upon her nerves, the terrible worry, and the lateness of the night were beginning to tell upon her powers of endurance.

In shrill, sharp accents that would have been serviceable as a fog signal on an Atlantic liner, the servant screamed several times—"Mrs Carlisle! Mrs Carlisle!"—but with no better result than that attending Violet's effort, the only difference being that Martha's voice aroused an old cock pheasant roosting in the branches over their heads, and this bird suddenly departed from his resting-place with a noise that for a moment struck terror into their hearts, until they had had time to realise the cause of it.

"Depend upon it, miss, Mrs Carlisle has lost her way in the woods, and will be all right as soon as daylight comes."

"Oh, I hope so; I do hope so," cried Violet; "but I can't get over a strange fear I had when we stood on the cliff. I fancied then that she was drowned. The idea seemed to force itself into my mind in spite of all my efforts to keep it back and overcome it."

"As I said before, miss, it was one of them hallelujahjinations, and you'll see your mother back soon after it gets light, and she'll be all right, except for the shock of being alone in the wood all night."

Martha was speaking solely with a view to cheering and encouraging her young mistress, for her own mind was almost made up that some tragedy had occurred, and that with the morning would come a gloomier tale than that of a lady losing her way in a wood on a dark night.

They stood there for at least twenty minutes, clutching each other's hands, unable to see each other's faces, and talking to keep up their spirits, Violet leaning against the tree for support, with the servant standing close beside her.

At last Miss Carlisle straightened herself up and said,—

"Let us make another effort to find the path."

Martha made no demur. She was getting stiff and weary from standing.

Again they commenced to grope their way through the bushes, testing with their feet every bit of ground in their endeavour to regain the pathway, and sometimes stooping down and feeling the soil with their fingers.

But they found neither path nor open space, and at last, weary and ill, they halted beneath another large tree, and Violet sat down upon the earth, too fatigued to advance a step further.

They had not been in this spot long, however, before a faint grey light became dimly visible through the trees, and the crowing of a cock sounded pleasantly in their ears. Day was beginning to dawn.

Quickly then objects in the woods became discernible, and soon they were able to peer through the trees and bushes with some hopes of ascertaining their whereabouts, while the entire place seemed suddenly to awaken into activity and music, becoming like a vast concert hall for the feathered tribe. Then once more they struggled along through the dense underbrush, steering their course in what they knew now must be a westerly direction, as they took care to keep the grey and golden streaks of dawn in their rear, and before they had proceeded a hundred yards, the stone wall and roof of one corner of a dwelling rose up before their view.

“Good gracious alive, miss!” exclaimed Martha, “here’s the house, and we not a hundred yards away. Well, I never!”

It was true. There stood, almost within a stone's throw, the eastern side of River Lawn, and all this dreary time they had spent in the dark forest, they had not been half a mile from home; indeed, during the last half an hour, while Violet had been resting on the ground, they had been within two hundred yards of it.

“Let us go back and look at once,” said Violet, releasing her hold of the servant’s hand and running quickly through the bushes, heedless of the brambles which tore her dress and pricked her ankles. Martha followed, her gaunt frame crashing through the underwood with almost as much noise as a buffalo would have made. In two or three minutes they had reached the fence enclosing River Lawn, and skirting it round to the gate, were once more in their own grounds.

A hasty examination of the house showed everything as they had left it. Mrs Carlisle had not returned. Violet’s fortitude waned now; her face grew drawn and haggard, and she appeared to be on the point of completely breaking down. The situation was becoming too trying. After a brief struggle within herself, she said,—

“Come to the cliff, Martha.”

Without a word the domestic followed her mistress to the edge of the cliff, and stood in the corner by the end of the fence dividing the grounds of River Lawn from the wood. It was a different scene then to what it had been when they were there before. The darkness had given way to bright daylight, and already slanting rays of the rising sun were piercing the openings between the trees and bushes, and glimmering upon the flowing waters ; the sweet fresh air seemed laden with fragrant perfume, and full of exhilarating and invigorating properties ; while the bullfinches, goldfinches, thrushes, and innumerable other birds made things lively and cheerful with their incessant song.

“ I feel strangely drawn towards this spot,” said Violet. “ I am afraid, desperately afraid, that mother is in this pool here.”

“ Oh, miss, please don’t talk like that. Come away, miss, come away ! ” cried Martha. “ Let us go and inquire if any one has seen her. She may have lost her way in the wood, or met with an accident, and slept at a cottage.”

“ No ; she said she was only going into the garden, and she never told a story. She had no intention of going anywhere else. Besides,

where could she go? What would she be doing at a cottage? Every one in the village had gone to bed before she went out, and there is no cottage within a mile."

"Come along, miss, we'll go for help now," said Martha, pulling her young mistress away. The fact was that, while leaning her long body over the edge, she had caught sight of a small red shawl hanging on to a broken root which protruded from the earth about half-way down the cliff, and she knew that it was a shawl which Mrs Carlisle was in the habit of wearing over her shoulders in the evenings.

They turned their backs on the river and, once more emerging from the garden into the wood, hurried along the pathway towards the village. About half-a-mile from home they met a gamekeeper, and told him of their distress. He had seen or heard nothing of the missing lady, but turned back with them to the village to aid in making inquiries. Every one they could find, either in cottages or fields, was questioned, but with the result that no one had seen Mrs Carlisle. Then Martha, feeling terribly like a culprit, but not knowing what to do or say, whispered to her mistress that perhaps they had better search the river.

Haggard and worn, but still full of pluck and resolution, Violet, in a low tone, asked the gamekeeper,—

“What is it they do when they think any one is in the water?”

The man looked at her with eyes aglow with kindness and pity, and answered,—

“They drags it, miss.”

“Then you must do that,” said Violet.
“What do you do it with?”

“Well, miss, my tackle isn’t of the most modern, but it’ll answer the purpose. I’ve got some ropes with big hooks on the ends.”

“You had better get them, then; and some people to help you.”

“I’ll fetch the constable, miss, and one or two others. But cheer up, miss, you’ll probably find your mother safe and sound before noon. If you’ll go back to the house, we’ll follow on pretty soon.”

Martha and Violet returned to River Lawn, but the former doggedly refused to accompany her mistress to the cliff; and the consequence was that both went into the kitchen and waited there.

The keeper meanwhile hurried through the village, and, obtaining the assistance of

the constable and a few other men, sent them on to River Lawn, while he went round by his cottage in the woods and procured his "tackle."

"You be off to River Lawn as quick as you can walk," he said to his wife. "There's trouble up there, and the young lady'll be glad of the services of a sensible woman like yourself."

"What is the trouble?" asked the woman.

"Bad enough," was the reply. "It seems likely that the mother has taken refuge in the river."

"Poor creature!" muttered the wife, as she hastily put on her bonnet and left the cottage.

After waiting a little while in the kitchen, impatience and anxiety overcame Violet, and, seizing Martha by the arm, she dragged that unwilling domestic out to the cliff. A few minutes later, the keeper, the constable, and three or four other men were assembled there in a solemn little group, anxious that the daughter and servant should retire out of sight before operations were commenced.

Violet, however, showed no signs of any intention to withdraw, but stood, still and

mute, holding on to Martha's arm, and dividing her attention between the water and the men. Seeing this, the gamekeeper, after a brief consultation with the constable, advanced and said,—

"We begs your pardon, miss, but if you would be so good as to go into the house while we works, we would be much obliged. We can't do it, miss, with you standing looking on—indeed we can't—although it's quite likely as it's all a false alarm."

Violet gave one long, intent look at the water below, and replied,—

"If you wish it, I will go away; but it only means postponing the agony for a few minutes. I must see her later."

"We do wish it, miss, if you please. And, begging your pardon, miss, my wife has come down to try to help a bit in the house, if you would be so good as to use her. She's very handy about a house, and is always glad to help any one in trouble. She's a good soul, miss, and is no prying gossip like some of 'em be in the village."

"You are very kind," said Violet, showing a disposition to break down and burst into tears; but finally overcoming it, she added,—

"I will go into the house; but let me

know the instant you find—the instant you find—*anything*."

"We will, miss."

"Mistress and servant slowly left the spot, and, crossing the lawn, entered the house. Here they found the keeper's wife, who at once proffered her services in any way in which they could be utilised.

"Thank you," Violet replied, to the woman's offer. "Would you mind going to your husband by the river, and coming and telling me the moment anything occurs?"

CHAPTER XVII.

FOUND DROWNED.

As soon as they had watched Miss Carlisle and Martha disappear through the doorway of the house, the gamekeeper and his assistants commenced their gruesome task. Ropes, with heavy hooks attached to the ends, were thrown out to the middle of the water, and then, having been allowed to sink to the bottom, were slowly dragged ashore. Over and over again this process was repeated, each time in a slightly different location ; but nothing was brought to the surface except a few bits of broken roots which the hooks broke off in the bed of the river.

In the meantime, the constable, having discovered a long pole, had tied to it several yards of rope, with a hook at one end, and was groping about with it in the corner

near the fence. He had noticed that this little spot formed a small inlet, of apparently greater depth than the rest of the river, and that the cliff there was a sheer precipice. For some time he continued handling his pole and rope just as though he were fishing for eels with a regular fishing-rod, without bringing to light anything save an old kettle. At last, however, his hook became entangled with something heavy, and the next moment a human form rose to the surface.

The keeper's wife, who had been watching the operations of first one and then another, gave a little scream, and was about to retreat to the house, when her husband caught her by the arm and said,—

“ Go in to the young lady and keep her out of sight until we get it inside. Don't say a word about it. Say we have not found anything yet. It'll take some time to get it down to that creek and up the bank.”

The woman did as she was told, and went into the kitchen, where Violet and Martha were waiting. The mute, inquiring look of the former was the signal for the good-natured matron to commence to fib.

“ No news, miss,” she said, in a faltering

voice, that might almost have betrayed her ; “ but they are searching very carefully.”

She couldn’t have said a word more if her husband had stood over her with a riding-whip, and her agitation was pitiful to behold.

“ I am going out to them,” replied Violet, rising from her chair.

“ No, you baint, miss,” was the prompt rejoinder of the gamekeeper’s wife, shutting the door, planting her body against it, and looking appealingly to Martha. “ The men says as they can’t work if you be there ; and Jim—that’s my husband—will give it me hot if I lets you go. Please bide here a bit, miss.”

The woman’s earnestness and determination had their effect, for Violet, wringing her hands in agony, lowered her voice to a whisper, and moaned,—

“ You have told me an untruth. They have found my mother.”

Then, putting her hands to her temples, she turned to her servant and said,—

“ Martha, go out to them. Give them directions.”

“ I think you are wrong, miss,” replied the domestic ; “ but I will go and see what they

are doing, if you will promise to remain here till I return."

"Yes, I will stay here. Come back to me as soon as you have told them. Her own room, Martha."

The servant departed, the keeper's wife opening the door to let her out, and then closing it again.

Violet walked to the window and looked out on the glorious scenery of woods in full summer bloom which stretched before her, and listened to the song of the birds as they twittered gaily in the morning sun, and flitted gracefully from tree to tree. Certainly there was nothing on that side of the house to indicate the unhappy tragedy that was being enacted on the other; and for a few moments it seemed impossible for the young girl to realise the full extent of the calamity that had befallen her.

She did not weep; not a drop of moisture came into her eyes. She only stared vacantly out at the woods, pondering over the strange foreboding that had seemed to possess and convince her that her mother was drowned. She was at that moment just as firmly convinced that the body had been found as though she had already seen and identified it. From the

moment that she had stood with Martha in the inky darkness on the edge of the cliff overlooking the stream, a grim presentiment had arisen in her mind as to the actual whereabouts of Mrs Carlisle ; and now again she felt certain that the waters had been robbed of their prey, and that it was on its way to the house.

A quarter of an hour elapsed in perfect silence. The keeper's wife stood near the closed door, looking gloomily down upon the ground, anxious to avoid interrupting the bereaved daughter's thoughts even by a single glance. Violet herself remained perfectly stationary at the window, leaning her head against the shutter, and keeping her face turned towards the woods.

Then all at once there sounded upon their ears the dull tread of several heavy feet in the hall, as of men carrying some weighty burden. From the tiled floor the sound passed to the wooden stairs, and, step by step, the inmates of the kitchen heard it ascend to the storey above, and into one of the bedrooms.

Neither of them spoke, but Violet drew herself up straight, and tightly clasped her hands before her. She was suffering an extent of anguish that seemed almost unbearable.

A few minutes passed away, and then the same footsteps were heard descending the stair, but they came more freely this time, as if unhindered by any burden. Then Martha's footsteps, sounding lighter than they had ever sounded before, were audible, approaching the kitchen, and the next minute the faithful woman entered, choking with sobs, and her features working convulsively.

"It's all true, miss," she sobbed; "it's just—"

But she said no more. Instead of finishing the sentence, she sprang forward and caught Violet's falling form in her arms. The girl had fainted.

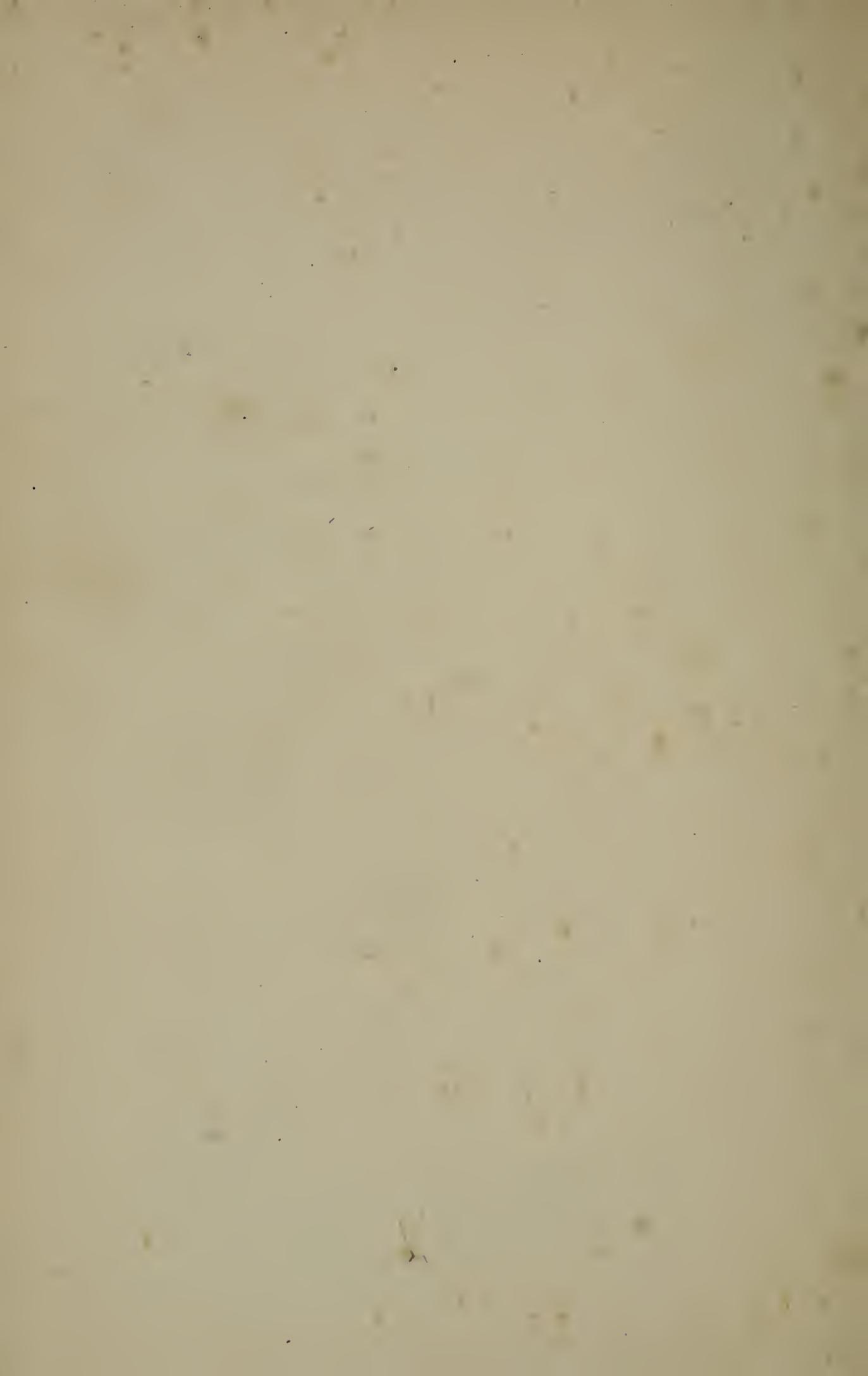
The gamekeeper's wife and Martha carried Violet out of the kitchen into the drawing-room, and laid her upon the sofa. Her body then was as limp and helpless as that of her mother, and remained so in spite of the various domestic restoratives administered by the two women. Fortunately, however, it was not long before Dr Harlow, the medical man monopolising all the practice in the neighbourhood, arrived, and through his agency Miss Carlisle was brought out of the swoon, but only to lapse into a state of hysteria.

Then the doctor sent his dog-cart back for

his wife—a woman who was about as good a physician as he himself, and a very much better nurse ; but when Mrs Harlow arrived, Violet was in such a condition that it was decided to administer a strong soporific, and thus induce sleep. Half-an-hour later, Martha and the doctor's wife had carried the girl upstairs, and comfortably tucked her away in her own bed.

It was evening when Violet awoke, and found a strange lady sitting by the bedside, but at first she had no recollection of the events of the previous night. When, however, one thing after another commenced to break in upon her memory in a fitful and uncertain order, Mrs Harlow deemed it best to enlighten her at once by telling her everything, and this she did in a manner that is possible only to a kind-hearted and noble woman.

END OF VOL. I.



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